The Tissandier Experiment

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The Tissandier Experiment

by JadedQuill

Summary

A post-S1 AU where instead of letting Will rot in the BSHCI, Hannibal steals him out of the hospital and keeps him captive personally.

Will wakes up on a comfortable bed, in a strange room, with a chain attached to his ankle.

Notes

Note 1: Sporadic updates are likely. It's 10k words so far, and I love it, but fair warning due to my current health I don't know when (or maaaybe if) it will have a proper ending. Figured I should be upfront about that.

Note 2: Tissandier was a French scientist, so my assumption is that the name would be pronounced “Ti-sawn-di-eh/ei” Basically, ending in the French language way, sounding like the end of “way” and not like “deer.”

Yes, this is my most pretentious title ever. Thanks, Hannibal.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke with a clear head. Fever no longer plagued him, and there was definitely no morphine in his system. His throbbing shoulder made that exceedingly clear. Though in need of a shower, he wasn't drenched in sweat. He did not remember any of his dreams, and had not woken in terror. He did, however, know without even opening his eyes that something was horribly wrong.

His last dips into consciousness had been brief but memorable. Once they quenched the fire in his brain, the doctors had talked him through just how bad it had been. The encephalitis required extended treatment but should otherwise not trouble him again. The gunshot wound to his shoulder would be much longer in healing. Once the formalities were taken care of, they bumped him up to a nice dose of morphine that left him in a different type of daze.

Since then, he'd slept a lot. The only thing that changed with time was his visitors. He pretended to be asleep rather than deal with Jack's alternately angry and brokenhearted questioning, or Alana's overbearing levels of concern and confusion. When he found out that Dr. Lecter was still walking free, he'd mostly waited for the bastard to darken his door to subtly gloat. Will envisioned the multitude of ways he could kill the man, for Abigail alone, but Lecter never showed. Instead, Will's companions were the flicker of fluorescent lights, monitors softly beeping with the beat of his heart, and a parade of doctors and nurses flanked by steel-faced agents. Handcuffs securing him to his bed meant Will wasn't going anywhere without dislocating his thumb again, and his shoulder was a constant source of discomfort at best. With nothing else to do, he drifted between sleep and scouring his memories for the truth. The perks of being framed as a dangerous serial killer? He had a private room and his own scowling guards at the door.

Now, even without opening his eyes, Will knew he wasn't in the hospital, a cell, or even a transport vehicle. The bed beneath him was one of the most comfortable he had ever lain in, the blanket draped over him soft and warm. Silence, wide and deep, rested around him. Except for what might, possibly, be the sound of water crashing against a shore. Though the sound would normally soothe Will, in this context, it sent a chill down his spine.

Put all together, the conclusion is inescapable. Will opened his eyes, taking in his high-end but clearly pared down surroundings. Nothing he could use as a weapon, not even a damn handle on the door out of the room. Will sat up carefully, and the faint clink of metal accompanied the swinging of his legs over the side of the bed.

Will stared down at the cuff around his left ankle, links of chain curling on the floor and disappearing under the bed. Gone was his hospital gown, and instead he was clad in a soft pair of sweatpants and a too-big button-down shirt. The quality of both was more than he would ever purchase for himself.

Something bubbled down in his gut. It percolated, floating upward until laughter burst from his lips. Once started, it became a force of its own, and there was no stopping it. Will clutched his head in his hands, bent over his knees as he trembled with peals of desperate laughter that become nearly indistinguishable from sobs. He wouldn't let himself tumble over that last edge into despair. Laughter was easier to bear. He laughed so long and hard that his abs ached and he barely heard the door opening. It was unsettling how his instincts trusted the presence that entered his unorthodox prison. As soon as Will registered him consciously, trust was the furthest thing from his mind.

Expensive, perfectly polished shoes paused as the door swung shut. Will stomped down on his emotional outburst before he could lose his already thin grasp on control. Only then did he look up at the man who betrayed his trust in nearly every way possible. He didn't hesitate to look into the eyes of the Copycat Killer and Chesapeake Ripper. The bubbling in Will's gut transformed into boiling in his veins. Will has nothing left to hide from Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and the only way to beat Lecter will be to understand him.

"I am not normally one to doubt my skills," Dr. Hannibal Lecter spoke as he always had, even and fluidly. A fact that only angered Will more. "Still, I must ask if your fever has returned."

Will snorted with derision, watching his captor place a tray of food on a small table. "Worried what might happen if you try to check?" Will taunted Lecter recklessly, his throat croaking lightly with disuse. He wondered just how long his leash was. If it was long enough to get to the tiny ensuite, then it was long enough to reach the doctor. It would be reckless to attack, but something dark and vicious within Will was itching to beat the other man to a pulp. Will was smarter than that, it seemed. Still somewhat in control. Lecter will expect an attack, more than likely.

Hannibal glanced back at Will from the mug and bowl he laid out, his expression as guarded as ever. He straightened, tray dangling from his left hand, deceptively loose in his grip.

"I would rather not have to hurt you."

Will let slip a fresh bark of laughter that sounded far too desperate for his taste. "You're a sadist," he growled back.

Hannibal hummed softly, as if thinking, but Will was fairly certain it was for show. Even now, he couldn't quite read the other man. Not clearly.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't antagonize me."

An obvious threat, but the problem was that Will's mind was already whirring, calculating, and Lecter's behaviour wasn't adding up. He'd gone to a lot of effort to frame Will for his crimes, even... Will choked back the anguish at the thought of Abigail. Pulling Will out of the hospital, bringing him wherever *here* was, it didn't fit.

"Why am I *here?"* Will finally demanded, gripping the mattress tightly and turning his gaze to his bare feet. "Framing me for your crimes made sense. This doesn't."

“Doesn’t it?” Hannibal answered with a tone that was almost light, and Will darted his gaze up to catch the slightest twitch of a smile. Hannibal didn’t make a move to leave or approach. He just stared at Will with his mask almost entirely in place. The twitch of his lips might even be intentional. Will can’t trust a damn thing.

Will roseto his feet. He wouldn’t move towards Lecter, but he couldn’t bear to stay seated any longer. The urge to pace warred with the urge to attack, but his head swam lightly as he stood, and it was all he could do to stay stable. The words stuck in his throat as he fought to keep the world from spinning any further.

“You need to eat,” Hannibal declared opportunistically. “Your blood sugar is low and you’ve been losing weight for weeks.” He opened the door once again. Thanks to the dizziness, Will missed how he managed it. Lecter paused in the doorway only long enough to say, “Silke chicken soup. Nothing objectionable.”

With that, he was gone. The door closed behind him, and after a moment, Will heard a lock click into place. The rage and despair settled deep in his gut, and he eyed the meal left behind. Will stared at it, frozen in place as his healing mind made connections at the speed of light. They’d never figured out what the Ripper was doing with his surgical trophies. Either Lecter assumed Will had already figured it out, or wanted him to. Memories of delicious meals, protein scrambles, flooded him with tastes and smells. Will dashed to the bathroom, dry-heaving into the toilet before his conscious mind finished putting all the pieces together.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter is a cannibal. Of course he is. He’s probably just waiting for Will to finish his recovery. Healthy meat would taste best.

Fuck.

Will was torn, if he was being honest with himself, between his hopes of escape and his desire to deprive Lecter of the meal he has clearly been waiting for. Not that it mattered. He couldn’t choke down that soup even if he wanted to. Every time he thought of food, he was back eating a meal with Dr. Lecter. He remembered savouring the taste, as Hannibal watched him take his first bites with rapt attention. Will assumed, like everyone must, that it was simply Hannibal taking well-earned pride in his delicious creations. Now Will *knew*, and couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it earlier. It was pride, yes, but that smile hid the joke he played on everyone who graced his table: diner or dinner.

Will’s stomach attempted to expel meals long digested, doing nothing but creating further pain now that it was empty of even bile. Will reached up to the sink, pulling himself up

enough to scoop water into his mouth. He didn't bother to swallow. Instead, he rinsed out his mouth out as best he could. He let the fresh water soak into his cheeks and tongue before sliding back to the floor.

He put together dates and times, building a map of the Ripper and Copycat kills with meals and specific organs Hannibal had served to him. Cassie Boyle had been the first Will could have eaten. Her lungs made into that breakfast scramble. There weren't enough kills, though, not that Will could piece together. Given everything he knew about the Ripper and Dr. Hannibal Lecter, he supposed that most of his pigs didn't make the elaborate displays. Most must simply vanish from their lives, only to wind up on the table. Had Hannibal started killing after he got bored with surgery? Did he kill that last patient on purpose, or had that been a complete fabrication? If he'd started young... he definitely hadn't killed elsewhere in the US in any similar fashion. Only as The Chesapeake Ripper had he made his statements. Will would have found any other killers too similar to the Ripper in the FBI database, but Lecter was from Europe. The answers they'd needed all this time were overseas. If Lecter had ever tripped up, made a mistake, it wasn't this side of the Atlantic.

Unless, of course, Will was the mistake.

The thought was not a comforting one, but also not a shock. Even if Jack caught Hannibal because of this, Will didn't expect to survive.

Hannibal's return should have been an opportunity. Instead, he found Will sitting on the bathroom floor, pale and with eyes closed, as he attempted to control his breathing. Will knew he needed to be watching his captor's reactions, to be ready to defend himself, but he just couldn't. Based on how much his shoulder had healed, he's been in the hospital a few weeks, rather than days. His blood-drenched doctor was right. Will can't function without fuel, even if he can't keep it down just yet.

"I wasn't lying about the food."

Will startled in place, muscles twitching and eyes flying open. Hannibal had moved to the (doorless) entrance of the bathroom without Will hearing a thing. Admittedly, his senses were wobbly, but the shock remained. If Hannibal shifted his ankle, his shoe would touch Will's foot. Will stared at their feet for a long moment, brain stuttering, before he tilted his head back enough to get a fix on Hannibal's lightly blurry face.

"You give me too much credit," Will managed. The statement would confuse most people, but Hannibal simply considered him.

“Your subconscious found the truth weeks ago,” Hannibal explained. “You have long referred to my work as sounders and my victims as pigs. I did not expect this knowledge to be quite so shocking to you.”

“Bet that pisses you off,” Will returned reflexively.

Anger, annoyance, even amusement were likely responses. Instead, Lecter met Will’s eyes, holding them with nothing but the strength of his personality. He tore through Will’s mind with his gaze, seeing as deeply as ever, but he no longer bothered to mute his attentions in the slightest. Will gulped reflexively, otherwise frozen in place.

“I could never entirely predict you. One of many things that make you unique, dear Will.”

The entire statement was terrifying, in its own way, but Will’s brain kept repeating, “Dear Will,” over and over again. A brand new theory was building behind his eyes, but his desperate need for denial muted the revelation. Instead, he stored it for later consideration.

Hannibal let him stew for a moment, considering, before leaning over to help Will to his feet. Will didn’t have the energy, physical or mental, to fight him off. Hannibal’s touch was both comforting and appalling. The strength that easily led Will back to bed would have been surprising before. Now it just made sense. The Ripper’s art necessitated physical strength. Corpses aren’t easy to carry.

Hannibal deposited him in a sitting position, then produced a bottle of blue liquid. He held it before Will, and Will tried hard not to laugh at the brightly coloured sports drink.

“Seriously?”

“You need the sugar, salt and water it contains. It’s not my first choice, but the seal is intact.” Hannibal gestured with importance. “So you know I haven’t tampered with it.”

Will took the bottle, hesitantly. He really needed to stop his head from swimming, and he wasn’t afraid of being drugged. Drugging him right now would be easy and not require deception. Lacing the bottle with dead people didn’t quite seem Hannibal’s style, either.

Hannibal nodded, standing fully to take a step back, but going no farther. He watched Will expectantly.

Will tore off the plastic seal, opened the top, and took a hesitant sip. He didn’t expect it to stay down, but after several long seconds with no ugly consequences, Will took another small sip.

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, almost another nod. He gathered up the cold soup and left the room without another word. The lock clicked shut behind him. Will took another sip of his drink, allowing his body to adjust itself as his mind flooded with every interaction he and Hannibal had ever had. Somewhere in there was an answer. Though Will wasn’t certain he wanted to find it, he knew his survival depended on it.

Chapter End Notes

Note 3: I realized I have a thing for Hannigram captivity fics, and the next thing I knew I had thousands of words written. Despite note 1, I doubt this will ever be abandoned, but I normally wouldn't post without a bit more of a plan. I just love what I have so far and really wanted to share it. (Path of Redemption, for my SPN fans, is still being reworked a bit. Not to fear, it will return.)

Note 4: Ok, so I was trying to make things as accurate as I could with Will's recovery. Then I actually googled Anti-NMDA Encephalitis and found out that 80% of the time it's caused by a tumour and also 80% of time found in women. A tumour is a good diagnosis, as it can be removed.

Regardless of the cause, it's treated with immunosuppressants, like cancer, because it is an autoimmune response. Basically, Will would have spent months or possibly years recovering. Some patients can be in comas for a long time. Recovery can be basically being like the original progression but in reverse. Sometimes psychosis returns but is not a sign of treatment failing, it just happens for a while.

So if he recovered he'd be immunocompromised for some time, then because the cause wasn't a tumour there's a much bigger chance of a relapse (contracting the same trigger virus again or whatever.)

Frankly, the show didn't portray it that way, so I'm not going to either. I guess I'm buying into the anti-virals and you'll be fine narrative that most authors here (and possibly the show itself) stick to.

I tried. I really did.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> “You wish to bargain,” Hannibal spoke with consideration. “Quid pro quo, Will?”
>
> The way he said the words made something in Will’s gut plummet beneath the ground. It felt like making a deal with the devil, a weighty darkness. Yet if it got Will his answers, he was the one gaining control.

Chapter Notes

> Will's imagination alone ears the graphic violence tag, even if it's still pretty tame so far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleep was the last thing on Will’s mind, but his body had other ideas. Will’s consciousness balked at such a vulnerable act, but exhaustion steadily dragged him down. Not that the sleep was deep or restful. Every time he shifted, a jolt of pain from his shoulder hauled him back toward the surface. He tossed and turned, diving and surfacing, flirting with visions of the raven feathered stag nosing against his back. His inner beast left dark and sticky tracks as they prowled the woods of his home. Fire crackled in a broken hearth. Will’s hands and arms coated in still-warm blood. It dripped off limp, trembling fingers, pooling into crystal decanters. A vein opened in his neck, life draining to sustain another. Arterial spray splashed across the walls of the Hobbs family kitchen.

The lights in the room flickered on and Will blinked, fuzzy vision but his mind fully awake. His sleep had been light and sporadic, and the dreams were never solid enough to settle into his long-term memory. He didn’t remember the lights turning off, but now that they were on, they stabbed at his eyes. He held up his good arm to block the worst of it as he got his bearings from the skylight. Either morning or evening, the sun was weak but bright enough to discern. Will let his arm fall before carefully sitting upright and scanning the small room. Nothing looked different, no sign of Lecter.

His bladder demanded attention, and his mouth was dry, but he still took the time to be sure there were no surprises waiting for him, trying to piece together the likeliest spots for surveillance. At the moment, he’d settle for feeling he had a smidge of privacy with which to relieve himself. Lecter’s probable physician’s indifference to bodily functions was beside the point.

Once he'd emptied his bladder and drank his fill from the tap, he eyed the shower wistfully. He didn't feel grubby yet, but he also didn't feel remotely clean. If he ran the water hot enough, the steam and condensation would provide some privacy, and there were towels by the sink. Still, a shower felt like too vulnerable a position to be putting himself in. That and the bandages on his shoulder weren't waterproof. Well, on the front at least, he couldn't see the back, but it felt the same.

Will estimated about two hours passed before his captor showed. Hannibal entered the room with a medical bag, rather than food. Will, rather light-headed and weak, still felt a burst of energy propelling him to sit back up, feet on the floor. His muscles tensed, stilled but twitching with the fight reflex, since flight was impossible.

Dr. Lecter sighed, placing the bagon one of the room's vacant shelves. Will would have to get around him to access it and any potentially sharp implements inside.

"Your bandages need to be changed, and the bullet wound tended to," he spoke in his factual, impersonal doctor's voice. "It would be best for you to cooperate."

Will glared at Hannibal's throat, imagining his hands wrapped around it. He knew he was too weak to put up a proper fight. Aside from perhaps drawing some blood, or raising a bruise or two, his efforts would be in vain. His pride demanded that he try, if only to make a statement, but he also knew he needed to wait for the right moment. Unless Lecter slipped up enough that Will got his hands on something like the scissors for cutting the bandages, it would only hinder future escape attempts.

"We both know I don't *actually* have a choice."

Hannibal tilted his head in consideration.

"The choice is limited," he granted, "but it is still a choice. One with consequences."

They both knew that subduing Will in his current state would take minimal effort, and co-operation would save him pain and indignity.

Still.

"You actually want me to co-operate?" Will demanded. "How about you start answering some questions?"

Hannibal blinked, a reaction that seemed genuine, especially as he immediately buried all signs of surprise.

"You wish to bargain," Hannibal spoke with consideration. "Quid pro quo, Will?"

The way he said the words made something in Will's gut plummet beneath the ground. It felt like making a deal with the devil, a weighty darkness. Yet if it got Will his answers, he was the one gaining control.

Will raised an eyebrow, meeting Hannibal's contemplative stare.

“I’ve got nothing to lose,” Will replied carefully, with as much strength and composure as he could muster.

Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back and shifted to a familiar posture. Far too familiar.

“Ask, then.”

There were a dozen different burning questions bouncing around Will’s skull. Only one would get Will the knowledge he truly needed.

“Taking me from the hospital wasn’t the plan, was it?”

It was a minute twitch of Hannibal’s cheek, but it confirmed that Will was right, and what Hannibal said out loud would help Will decipher the truth from lies in the future.

“Do I strike you as an impulsive person?”

Will actually rolled his eyes, entirely unafraid in that moment.

“Everything else I know about you aside? You meticulously framed me for your crimes. Your plan was for me to rot in prison, ensuring that no one would ever believe me, the truth. Everything you do is careful, calculated.” Will clenched the mattress so hard his fingers ached. “Taking me from the hospital was impulsive. If you wanted to keep me prisoner, there were many, *many* better opportunities.” Will carefully didn’t ask *why* Hannibal had done this. Hannibal would only respect this game (if at all) if they respected the rules. On the surface, anyway. “*Don’t* lie to me-” Will blinked. An odd sense of déjà vu threatened to floor him with trembling fear and grief. He clamped down on it, hard. Oddly enough, it worked. “I prefer sins of omission to outright lies.”

Another slight nod from Hannibal, eyes shifting to the side as he considered.

“Perhaps a tad impulsive,” he finally allowed.

Though minute, the admission was a victory for Will. The lack of planning for this meant Hannibal might have made a mistake. It also meant that Hannibal genuinely wanted Will to behave, to avoid unnecessary conflict, and that was a heady thing to consider. It only ranked below the impulsive decision itself. Hannibal had planned for Will to go to prison, but something compelled him to change his plans. Something impulsive.

“Now, I must change your bandages,” Hannibal reminded.

Will clutched the mattress and looked away with a scowl.

“Wouldn’t want the meat to spoil,” he bit out, even if he wasn’t sure he meant it. He was about 50/50 on if Hannibal planned to eat him at this point. He figured his death was inevitable, even if it was another moment of impulse, so there was room to manoeuvre. Even as he spoke, Will began unbuttoning enough of the shirt for access, and not a button more. That the dark blue shirt was too big and broad in the shoulders was helpful in this case, but as he considered this point, it finally dawned on Will that it was almost certainly one of

Hannibal's. Still, the new itch to remove it was pale compared to the sense of protection it offered.

He kept his eyes averted as Hannibal approached. Will planned to stay remote and removed. He failed miserably.

Hannibal put his left hand further down Will's shoulder, still protected by the too-large shirt fabric. With the right, he grasped the edge of the soiled covering, and his thumb brushed against bare skin. A traitorous shiver tickled Will's spine, and he jolted as if stung.

Will flinched hard enough at his touch that the flex of his shoulder muscles caused him considerable pain, added to by Lecter's reflexive grip holding him in place. Will froze as soon as his body let him, darting his gaze to catch Hannibal's reaction. His instincts screamed danger.He expected to see something in the realm of anger or frustration, and it was possible those feelings were there, but the only thing Will got in the end was a hint of a greedy impulse swiftly quashed. Will's instincts compelled him tostay still and silent, grateful that the rest of the inspection, cleaning, and application of fresh bandages concluded in a professional and near silent manner. Though the silence from Hannibal was unnervingly out of character.

The entire encounter left Will's head spinning.

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Time passed in fits and starts.

Will knew he had to regain his strength in order to survive. The question was if the time it took Will to recover was the only time he had, or if the plan for him was as more than just dinner. He ate the pretentious black chicken noodle soup when it was next offered. At least he knew the strange black meat wasn't human. Lecter didn't stick around to watch him eat, thankfully. At least, not in person. Will assumed that his fancy cell was wired for audio and video. In fact, after the first two days, his captor appeared so sporadically that a fresh fear settled into Will's brain and made itself at home. If Hannibal Lecter got arrested, or killed, no one might ever find him. Will might never know what happened. Instead, he would meet a slow and painful death by starvation. Hannibal would probably find that amusing.

All Will could glean about his location was its isolation. He guessed by the ocean, but he couldn't be sure. The sound could be distorted by the time it reached him, and Will still didn't entirely trust his senses to reflect reality with any accuracy. The small skylight in the roof stayed closed, but it allowed in the only sunlight Will might ever see again, and helped him keep a grip on the passage of time.

It tookthree days in his cell before Will discovered that the short wall opposite the bathroom was not a wall at all. On closer inspection, it was some kind of fancy wooden blinds, near invisible joins between the slats. It was the type that must raise up into the ceiling on hidden

rails, but sturdier than any Will had ever seen. Hewas certain there was a window on the other side, but could find no sign of a manual release.

Will spent long hours alone, resting physically while his mind spun at a frenzied pace. He stumbled throughthe fog of the last few months, trying to piece together what Hannibal did to him. The *why* the *betrayal* he stuffed down as unhelpful.Other times,he considered the present and vividly imagined all the bloody ways his captivity could end. When he had the energy to move about, he mapped out every corner of the room. He paced the length of it, pulling and prodding at everything he could. The metal and leather that ensnared his left ankle was solid, quality construction. The chain that vanished under the bed looked thin, but every link was solid. Beneath the bed was pitch black, the chain's source concealed in the darkness. Even when Will lay on the floor and reached in with his good arm, he couldn't touch the end. The bed was too low to squeeze under any further than his shoulder.

With food bringing renewed strength, Will found the fear receding as his fury gained steam. It took everything in him not to snarl at Lecter when he made his brief appearances. He knew exactly where his rage stemmed from, and he while he didn't question it, he clung to it like a lifeline in those moments. So he ate the meals, deliberately and ostentatiously vegetarian, left for him. Often several at a time.Alternate proteins were plentiful, and since Hannibal didn't linger, there were no more discussions. Hannibal left pre-cut bandages and supplies Will needed to keep the wound healing well, with nothing that he could use as a weapon.

As Hannibal's appearances got even shorter and more perfunctory, Will let himself hope, just a little, that Jack was on to him. Even if Jack still trusted him, something was keeping Lecter occupied. Though he said nothing to that effect, Will got enough of a sense that whatever was going on, it was keeping the man very busy.

Will's thoughts turned towards the people who had failed him. He wondered if they all still thought Will was the copycat. Had they worked out that the copycat was just the newest guise of the Ripper? Had Will told them in his fevered daze? Jack could be fooled into believing Will was the copycat. Lecter's frame job was as meticulous as everything he did. Still, Will had solid alibis for many of the Ripper kills. Of course, them working out the truth required them to believe the ramblings of a madman in the middle of a fever dream. Even Beverly had probably written Will off at this point.

Will's *gift* had always been more of a burden. Using it to get into the minds of killers added to the weight, but it had been one he could bear until Hannibal. Profiling was a talent that made something good out of the darkness in Will's mind. Will's empathy was mostly just the product of keen observational skills, years of study into criminal psychology, and an extremely vivid imagination. The rooms of Will's current imprisonmentwere devoid of distractions. Will had his imagination, his memories, but the more time he spent in the past, the more Will itched for something, anything, to take him away, out of his head. Especially when he realized that the voice in his head now sounded an awful lot like Hannibal's.

Will ached for the freedom and privacy of his property in Wolf Trap, his pack. Locked in this place, with nothing to stimulate his mind but his own thoughts, was a fresh torture. Prison might have been worse, he supposed, but more likely he was just swapping one type of torture for another, and his current situation was likely to get much worse. Although, he

supposed, Lecter was nowhere near as insufferable as Chilton. Infinitely more dangerous, of course. Frederick Chilton was over-eager and clumsy, easy to manipulate. Hannibal Lecter was brilliant, and saw far, far too much of Will. The ease they had built, the friendship, would certainly be used against him.

Will missed his dogs more than anything. Alana might not believe in his innocence, but at least she'd taken in Will's pack. Next to his dogs, he missed the freedom of nature and his chosen solitude. He missed the land and the trees, the open skies and the peace of the river.

Will was mid-pace, days into his captivity,when he slammed into a realization. He had to stop trying to find answers buried deep in his memories. Whatever had happened in his missing time, he couldn't get at it on his own. He could barely scratch the surface so far. Instead, he finally had to do the thing he'd been avoiding. He needed to get into Hannibal Lecter's head instead. Not by trying to read through the mask, but in the way Will did best.

Will sat himself at the small table, it and the chairs bolted to the floor. No using them as weapons, of course. Will imaginedit was the lavish, and artfully creepy, decorated dining table in Hannibal's home. He took in a deep breath, straightened his posture, and let the pendulum swing.

I've spirited Will Graham out from under the noses of Jack Crawford and the FBI. I blend in perfectly with the overworked hospital staff. All it takes is scrubs, a lab coat, and a surgical cap and mask, when appropriate. My time as a surgeon provides me with everything needed to blend in.

Will didn't know enough about how Dr. Lecter got him out. He could only wildly theorize, with no evidence to interpret. So he skipped forward.

Taking Graham is an impulsive move, though Will can't see the why, not clearly. *I hide him in one of my properties, listed under another name. I am careful, manipulating existing plans to suit this new one. I establish my innocence,* somehow, *and send the FBI running in another direction. Watching Jack Crawford crumble as he loses another agent is satisfying. Taunting him these many years has been amusing, but the appeal is waning. Now Agent Crawford's professional life crumbles alongside the personal. Uncle Jack's not sure if he's lost Will Graham to madness or the real Ripper, and he can't be sure. He has no proof of Will's innocence. The evidence points directly to his wayward professor escaping, having committed the crimes. Now it will only take one precise blow to send him spiralling out of control, and in the wrong direction.*

Will rubbed at his eyes, trying to shrug off Hannibal's skin and feeling it cling stubbornly in places. To count on any kind of rescue at this point seemed foolish at best. Either Will starved, or Hannibal finished hiding his trail, or taunting Jack, and then got around to the real reason he was keeping Will captive. Will's theories on this front, by this point (he thinks) nearly a week into his (conscious) stay, are many and varied. None of them end well for Will. Best case, maybe he gets to take the Ripper down with him.

If he wilfully avoided some possibilities? Well, he never claimed to be perfect.

Will was resting in bed, laying in the dark, when the auditory hallucinations started once more.

“Agent Graham?”

He felt at his forehead in immediate concern. He didn’t feel feverish, or at least wasn’t sweating, and had spotted no other symptoms of the encephalitis’ return. Still, hearing Abigail’s voice was impossible. It had to be a hallucination.

A strangled sound, desperate and coated in despair, broke from his throat before he could stop it, followed by words he hardly tried to keep back.

“This really shouldn’t be a surprise,” Will muttered to himself. He’d always been unstable. He hadn’t been so twisted around that he didn’t know what was real until Lecter had used his illness against him. That he was hearing things even when relatively healthy wasn’t all that surprising, really. Perhaps Hannibal’s limited presence in Will’s cell was more about studying the effects of isolation and confinement on him. If the goal was to further break him down, it appeared to be working.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail added softly, her voice overflowing with regret. It was an odd thing for her to say, but Will supposed his subconscious must think he needed to hear it.

“I know I didn’t kill you,” Will replied for his own benefit, reassurance. “But... you still died because of me.”

“It was Hannibal... I...” Her voice trailed off, vanished into the ether.

No matter how desperately Will wanted her company, he couldn’t summon the dead child back. She was gone.

Grief and rage paced furiously in his chest.

Will knew that Hannibal must be expecting an escape attempt. With every day and every visit that went by, he must expect it more and more. Will Graham was no fool. He knew his time of relative comfort was ending. Although he had yet to see the Ripper in action personally, with Will’s shoulder, it hardly mattered whether Hannibal had superior strength and agility on a normal day. All that Will could do was force himself to hold in his urge to attack until his body was as functional as possible, and hope for a genuine opening.He stretched and exercised his muscles, calculated how to fight off the more physically capable man with one

arm still happiest in a sling. He came up with several plans. None of them ended up mattering.

Hannibal entered the room, the day after Abigail's voice had haunted him. His posture was slightly more relaxed than usual, and he was carrying a tray of fancy sandwiches. Will got to his feet as soon as the door opened, out of habit and self-defence. It was safer to be on his feet, and he never heard movement before the lock turned. The sandwiches clearly contained meat. The first meat Hannibal had brought him since the chicken soup.

Abigail's severed ear flashed in Will's vision, followed by the red of fresh blood and rage.

He moved without thought, a conduit for the anger and agony that rampaged their way out from where Will had kept them so carefully restrained. Before the tray hit the table, Will's foot connected with the back of Hannibal's knee. Or it should have. Hannibal let the tray drop to the table, his artful work scattering across it, and shifted just enough that Will's bare foot connected with the back of his calf instead. The attack still caused Hannibal to stumble, but not fall to one knee, as was the intention. Will pressed on, committed now. He threw himself at the man that had toyed with his life, like a cat batting at a mouse. He wrapped his good arm around Lecter's neck, but instead of hauling back to choke him, Will found his momentum continuing forward. Hannibal curled and launched Will over his head so that he landed on his back with a jarring thud that pushed air from his lungs and reverberated through the bullet wound.

Will knew he had to keep moving. He felt Hannibal shifting to pounce and rolled to the side, ignoring the pain and lack of air. Will dodged Hannibal's first attack, but noticed with devastation that the move had tangled his feet in the chain. He barely slipped his right leg free when Hannibal got a solid grip on Will's good shoulder. The killer easily shoved Will onto his stomach, wrenching his left arm painfully behind his back. The other hand seized onto Will's wounded shoulder, pinning him under Hannibal's weight. Will's back, neck, and shoulders all spasmed in agony. He bit back a scream as his shoulder seared so desperately it must have torn open, but he couldn't stop a pained gasp as Hannibal ground his palm down into the bullet wound.

"Perhaps next time you'll think before you strike," Hannibal taunted, amused.

Will snarled in response, a feral sound. He scrambled with his legs and bucked against the hold, even knowing it would cause the fresh lance of agony across his back. Hannibal dug one knee into Will's lower back, then adjusted his grip on Will's good arm just enough to set nerves on fire, racing up his arm and into his skull.

"Fuck you," Will spat, though the pained, stuttering delivery softened his intended bite. He trembled with the fresh agony, but he would fight Lecter for every inch.

Hannibal hummed in a thoughtful tone. "Fear makes you rude, Will." He released the tension in Will's twisted limb just enough to shift his hold. Hannibal never allowed even a hint of an opening. He moved quickly and efficiently, and then Will's wounded shoulder was pounding in the relief of newfound freedom, just as Hannibal's grip snaked into his hair, wrenching his head backward. The predator above him leaned forward, now close enough to whisper against the shell of Will's left ear. Will tried not to shiver at the sensation of hot breath

against sensitive skin, a physical reaction that entirely ignored his efforts. Then he registered the words being spoken. “A dangerous thing to be, wouldn’t you say?”

As if Hannibal had hit a play button in Will’s brain, associations, images, and sounds flashed through his mind’s eye. Hannibal was never obvious, never simple. His words weren’t just a warning regarding their current power imbalance, but something deeper and more meaningful. Hannibal Lecter was, on the surface, the perfect gentleman. Social graces mattered to him. Being rude was a default defensivesetting for Will. The day he’d met Dr. Lecter, Will had seenthat manners were important to him. The best way to set the psychiatrist off balance, even if just a little, was to offend his sensibilities. Fear might make Will rude, but he was more than capable of embracing the rudeness intentionally.

On more than one occasion during their early sessions, Will had nudged Hannibal’s careful order out of place, just enough to irritate. He tried to get a rise out of his doctor, compelled to ruffle the ostensibly unflappable man. Perhaps his status with the FBI, his unusual brain, his position as both threat and excellent patsy, were the only reasons he’d lived this long.

There was no obvious connection between the Ripper victims, because Hannibal had chosen them for offending his sensibilities with behaviour that most would just brush off. As long as Lecter waited long enough before striking, there would be no way to connect that rudeness to the victim’s deaths. Even just having a bad day, making the mistake of being rude to Dr Lecter in a moment of weakness. Possibly just offensive behaviour Lecter witnessed, Will guessed. Hannibal might keep a written record, but he seemed capable of simply remembering it all. That was safer, no paper trail.

Maybe Hannibal could see the connections firing in Will’s brain. Maybe he just decided that he’d made his point. Either way, the predator retreated and the guise of a man returned. Will attempted to pull himself into a more dignified and, more importantly, less painful position. Standing would take more time. He was still woozy from the pain on top of weakness, and so instead he glared up at his captor, fixing his gaze on the throat Will would love to slice open in a mirror of vengeance for Abigail. Hannibal gathered up the destroyed remains of their meal. Though it seemed still perfectly edible, Will wouldn’t have touched it anyway.

Will still wasn’t sure why he wasn’t in prison, or dead, but an image was forming out of the fog. Slow, distant, but with heavy inevitability.

“I’ve been rude to you since the day we met,” Will spoke his thoughts out loud, not bothering to hide his ire or bewilderment. He carefully stretched what he could of his aching back, neck, and shoulders, gently easing them into relaxing.

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, and Will flicked his gaze higher for just a moment. Hannibal held the tray in one arm and put his hand in his pants pocket. The door to the cell clicked back open.

“Yes,” Lecter agreed. He flashed a smile that was wicked in its promise of violence, and then Will was alone once more.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've ever received so many kudos (and bookmarks and subscriptions) in such a short period of time. Add to that the lovely comments? People, I am blown away. I only hope I can continue to provide a story you all can enjoy. Thank you so much!

If you wish, you can find me on tumblr at jaded-quill. There you can find updates, ramblings, and the occasional reblog of people like Neil Gaiman. (Also, a more lengthy, rambling, outpouring of my feelings about the reaction to chapter 1.)

Seriously, I'm floored. 💜

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will, stuck in his head.

An interlude of sorts.

Chapter Notes

I really don't know what to say. 114 kudos after only 2 chapters? This wasn't supposed to get much attention, you guys. I am both thrilled and terrified.

Thank you all so much for the love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Will returned to bed, he was unsurprised to discover that lying on his back hurt more than it had before. His right shoulder throbbed where Hannibal Lecter had dug the heel of his hand into it. The more Will sat with the pain, replaying the encounter again and again to dredge it for information, the more unsettled he felt.

Physical pain wasn't anything new to Will. Mostly, he just suffered headaches. Migraines, tension headaches if he neglected his stretches and exercises, or spent too much time at a desk. He was stabbed, in his time as a cop, almost exactly where Jack shot him. As a kid, he'd been no stranger to pain. Once he learned how to turn his empathy from liability to weapon, it kept him safe until he pushed someone too far. The dirty fighting he'd picked up around the docks had saved his life more than once.

Yes, Will was old friends with pain. This, however, was the first time he'd seen the real Hannibal underneath the guise of professional and gentleman. The Hannibal that moved swiftly and precisely to disable Will, and the Hannibal that took pleasure frominflicting pain, even if it was only enough to make his point.

Which was Will's point, he supposed. He'd probably ripped a stitch, at the very least, but given that Lecter harvested organs while his victims were still alive, the pain he normally inflicted was orders of magnitude higher. Will's good arm and shoulder would be fine by morning, more or less, and Hannibal would probably just make Will endure fresh stitches. True, for now, he seemed to want Will alive, but his reaction to Will's attack was unexpectedly tame.

The answers were in his memory, somewhere.

Will's recollection of the confrontation in the Hobbs' kitchen, standing over the smears of Abigail's blood, wasn't as clear as he'd like. His few days preceding it, without fever, had brought clarity about the copycat. His mind came back to life, allowed him to make the connections and see the truth. The fever had returned swiftly, though it hadn't reached the point of hallucination,and in its wake the memories blurred. He remembered the thought process; the associations bringing the woven lies and influences to life. The conclusion that Dr. Hannibal Lecter was the copycat killer, that was solid, the rest wavered in the heat of his fever, coming in and out of focus.

Wind him up and watch him go.

Will had been certain of that, too, in the moment.Lying in bed, Will had a moment of rueful humour. He trusted no one with his mind. His entire life, he'd known better than to let a shrink try to analyze him. Even the necessity of having a psychiatrist clear him for fieldwork wouldn't have, on its own, forced him to be honest.

Dr. Lecter's dramatic gesture, clearing Will for duty, had bought a layer of honesty. Honesty would also require Will to admit that the doctor had intrigued him after that. So Will finally let a psychiatrist in, and the bastard was a serial killer. Naturally.

Will remembered Hannibal calling them friends, and how he *wanted* to believe it, even though he didn't. Dr. Hannibal Lecter wasn't like most people. Will had seen that much, but whatever Lecter's relationship with his own darkness might be, his control over it, presenting himself how he did? It was admirable. No. Will was envious of that control. He'd suspected Hannibal to be capable of murder in theory, but in practice? Outside of self-defence, he'd never considered it. Not until it was far too late. Now, the reality made him reconsider the pair of corpses in Dr. Lecter's office. It might have truly been self-defence. The defensive wounds were genuine, but there were pieces missing.

Hannibal must have known Tobias Budge was the killer they were searching for. He'd known much more than he shared. Known, and still sent Will to Budge's shop. Curiosity must be one of his driving forces, but perhaps he'd wanted Will to win. The first words out of Lecter's mouth, when Will arrived at the doctor's office and crime scene, had been startlingly genuine.

" I was worried you were dead."

Will hadn't known what to say to that. It wasn't the words on their own. No one else batted an eye. Bruised and bloodied, if not actively bleeding, Hannibal had just killed a man. Yet he showed no significant concern for himself. There was a fire behind those eyes. It burned hot, yet tempered; barely controlled. The fire brought out the redder shades of his irises, a symbolic match to the literal blood staining his face, the split skin atop his nose. It evoked fury, fury that Will Graham had nearly died?

Then it was gone.

Hannibal's concern and relief were still there, but the fire and fury vanished. Will wasn't even entirely sure he had seen it. He'd already had an auditory hallucination that day, not to

mention the raccoon that probably never existed.

Jack took control of the conversation, asking for details about the confrontation, and Will was grateful for it. He'd placed what he saw in the 'Might Not Be Real' file. It was rapidly gaining in size. Eclipsed only by the worsening night terrors.

Will pulled out the memory with fresh eyes. If it was real, what was it? A rare slip-up? A glimpse of the real Hannibal Lecter? Will could still hear the music Budge tried to make, his serenade to the Ripper. It had echoed in his ears as he observed his doctor. Hannibal's fury clearly wasn't directed at Will. Could Hannibal really feel that strongly about the possibility of Will's death? Hannibal had his own plan for Special Agent Graham's future. All that precision and control that he maintained, it probably didn't allow for others interfering in the plan.

Then again, the 'good' Dr. Lecter had sent Will straight into the lion's den.

"Huh." Will didn't mean to say it. The sound emerged without intent as a piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

Another test. Another deadly encounter. Wind Will up and watch him go. He rapidly compiled a new timeline of events. Since regaining clarity, he had gone through some memories, but had mostly focused on trying to recover lost time. Now he made himself envision as much of Hannibal Lecter's actions behind the scenes as he could.

He's already read about me, and not only does he get insight into the FBI, but he also gets to poke at my unique *mind.*

When Will was spinning his wheels on the Shrike case, Hannibal gave him the gift of Cassie Boyle. Field kabuki. Different in all the ways Will needed, allowing him to see the Shrike in the negative. How had he not seen the Ripper in it before? Her lungs were missing; removed while she was still alive. Lungs that Hannibal fed to Will the next day, because the cannibal got pleasure in knowing what the meat really was, while everyone he fed raved about the food. As horrible as it was, that bit Will could easily wrap his mind around. Power, control, and art. It made Will's stomach churn, but he understood the appeal.

Hannibal called to warn Hobbs, leading to Will taking his first life. The pieces fell together in retrospect, providing new context to their conversations. Dr. Lecter encouraged his patient to accept his darkness. Pieces were still missing. He had to make assumptions or leave blanks in many places.

Which led back to Budge, who was serenading Lecter. They met before that night, somehow, through the patient Budge allegedly killed in Dr. Lecter's office. How soon did Hannibal know the identity of the killer? Had it been a long, failed courtship dance, or did they simply meet and Tobias Budge fell to his knees in worship? The end had been quite the fight, that much was clear from the scene.

If Will wanted to give Hannibal any credit, and he really didn't want to, he would allow that Lecter gave Will all the warning he could without giving himself away. Will hadn't gone there alone. Two officers had died at Budge's hands and he was nearly the third. Will's guilt

about leaving to chase after phantom dogs was lighter than he would have predicted. Maybe he could have saved at least one of them, simply by being another pair of eyes. Maybe he'd just be dead, too.

It was possible that Hannibal just wanted Budge out of the way, and if Will killed him, well, that just meant even more fodder for therapy. Perhaps Hannibal got a kick out of sending his patients into danger. Had he pushed other patients into dangerous situations, just to see what would happen? He must be too careful to get caught by such a damning pattern of behaviour. Appearances are important to Dr. Lecter, and his reputation is impeccable. So maybe just Will, or perhaps a select few. If he could look at patient records in that moment, he'd relish diving into the potential insight. He'd find what most would overlook, but in his cell, Will must make do with what was already in his head.

Budge killed his friend, Franklyn, Hannibal's patient. According to Hannibal. There had been no reason not to believe it before. In retrospect, either killer might have done the deed before they fought each other.

Will slipped into Hannibal's perspective with increasing ease. Hannibal was unbothered about having taken a life, but Will had definitely seen his fury. Fury aimed at the already deceased Budge. Will's wounded hand was proof enough for Hannibal that there had been a fight, plus whatever the two had discussed before the bloodshed had started. The rage Will saw, a still moment amongst the chaos, was at himself for letting Budge die so easily. Will felt the killer in that flash, the hungering monster hiding behind the suave gentleman.

Desperate as he was to figure it all out, exhaustion was setting in. The confrontation, on top of his weakened state, must have drained him, but his mind was still whirring, making new associations and analyzing memories with fresh perspective.

" You are alone, because you are unique."

"I'm as alone as you are."

Hannibal had colleagues, social circles, but no one close. No one he could call a true friend. Even though he'd started insisting that *they* were friends. Two people, closed off and alone, together in their isolation.

"If you follow the urges ... as the inspirations as they are. ...other than yourself."

Will blinked sleepily, trying to hold on to consciousness as he teased the memory out of the haze of illness. Hannibal wanted him to give in to his darkness, to kill. Not a revelation, really. Not anymore. Surgeon, psychiatrist, serial killer, all three labels spoke of control over other human beings.

"I know who I am. Not so sure I know who you are anymore."

Despite all the illness and manipulation, Will knew who he was at his core.

" I can see you now."

He could see below the surface, but not deep enough to know exactly what Hannibal wanted from him.

"What do you see?"

Will's eyes fluttered shut, despite his best efforts. He couldn't make himself sit up, and sleep was determined to take him. He couldn't see enough, but as the darkness took him, Will remembered tone, posture, and a ferocious hunger to be *seen*.

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Will slept deeply, or at least dreamlessly. When he awoke, he was curled awkwardly on his front. Drool pooled on the pillow he had wrapped his upper body around. He felt vaguely like he'd heard a sound, but as he groggily dragged himself towards alertness, he saw no sign of his captor. It wasn't until Will pushed himself upright with his good arm that he noticed what had changed.

There was a small pile of items sitting on the counter by the door, and Will abruptly realized that his shirt was gone. There was a numbness in his bad shoulder, the bandages fresh and cleaned. Some sort of local anaesthetic was wearing off, which was confusing for several reasons.

Will pondered this slowly, blinking carefully. He almost never had this much trouble waking up. Even with the encephalitis, it hadn't felt like this. So he'd been drugged *and* given a local anaesthetic? Why? The knowledge that Hannibal had access to him while unconscious didn't bother Will overmuch. It wasn't exactly the first time, and he couldn't do anything about it. On this occasion, the former surgeon had probably fixed the damage he'd caused during their brief fight. It was likely that stitches had torn through Will's flesh, requiring replacement. It was fair enough, he supposed, that Hannibal didn't trust him to submit to the procedure, but it lacked his sadism and flair for the dramatic. A quick check beneath the bandage on the front showed nothing had changed, so whatever it was, Will couldn't see without a mirror. It felt the same as before, beneath the gauze.

The pile Lecter had left behind for him was simple. Two fresh shirts, slightly too large, and another pair of altered sweatpants that were a just little too small. Will had tried not to think about why those pants existed, who they might have previously belonged to. He failed, of course.The sweats werealtered; a zipper sewn all the way down the left leg so that they could be donned and removed despite the ankle chain.

There was really only one person they could have belonged to. The only person Hannibal Lecter might have also kept in relative comfort. Miriam Lass's arm had been frozen, its age hard to tell. All they knew for certain was that she'd been alive when it was removed. Had he kept her here only long enough to decide what to do with the unlucky trainee? Will tried

picturing one of his brighter and more tolerable students trapped in this space, but he couldn't see any of them lasting long. Not with their sanity intact. However Lass had met her end, Will had inherited some of the last pants she'd ever worn. He wondered if another victim would say the same about him in the future.

Will reluctantly shrugged on a white shirt. The room wasn't cold, but he felt warmer, less vulnerable, with something protecting his skin. Also in the pile was a sling, which Will pulled on without hesitation. The support wasn't immediately noticeable, as his shoulder still tingled with partial numbness, but he knew it would help the healing process.

Next to the shirts and sling were a small stack of food and a thermos of coffee. Evidently, Lecter didn't plan to be back until tomorrow. Well, that was something. It also meant that Will could tolerate attempting a shower soon, instead of using facecloths to spot clean. He'd have to be careful with the bullet wound, but at least he knew he wouldn't have to deal with interruptions. The food was the sort that would keep for the day, and the coffee would cool before the morning. With no way to use it as a weapon, Will poured himself a splash and revelled in the taste. Not just any coffee, but the kind Hannibal had made for him on more than one occasion. It was still the best damn coffee Will had ever tasted. Which really just summed it all up. Best coffee ever, made by the serial killer who framed Will for his crimes. Well, given he might never see the world outside of this room again, he might as well enjoy what little he could.

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Hannibal did not return the next day, or the next. The first day with nothing to eat was unpleasant, the second was substantially worse. Will's stomach complained loudly and painfully. He had plenty of water, but it was a poor substitute for food. Will knew exactly how long it took for a person to starve to death. He was more familiar with the intricate details of what occurred after death, even had a successful monograph on determining time of death by insect activity. A healthy individual could last for three weeks while their body cannibalized itself; if they had access to clean water. Given his weakened state and minimal fat reserves, he might only have a week or two of suffering to look forward to if Hannibal never returned. Dehydration would be much faster, but his survival instinct was too strong to do that to himself.

With nothing but his thoughts to occupy his time, Will cycled through the same events over and over.

" No traceable motive. You were just curious what I would do. Someone like me. Someone who thinks how I think. Wind him up, and watch him go."

The problem, other than starvation, was that Will's knowledge, his assumptions, were based on an incomplete picture. Will's memories of the past months were dense with black pits of nothing. Like a minefield in the forest of his mind, treacherous to chart. With some blackouts,

he had been painfully aware of the missing time, but others, he could now see, his doctor had carefully camouflaged.

The fuel of Will's resistance, his current coping tactics, wouldn't hold up for long. Sticking to his morality, his grief and outrage, sheltering their flames and feeding them fuel, was a short-term solution. His grief at losing Abigail, the pain at the betrayal, the anger at being used, these already felt dangerous. Picturing Hannibal's death was satisfying, and Will indulged in it frequently, but one thing he knew for certain was that his psychiatrist had always been too keen on Will embracing his darker thoughts and feelings. So, fantasizing about murder in satisfying detail could play right into the bastard's hands.

Hannibal's betrayal had many components. There were more than enough reasons to hate him, without even touching his Chesapeake Ripper persona. An utterly ridiculous fact, but true. The fever didn't explain everything Will had experienced. Sorting out which thoughts and memories were his own, which were real, which were hallucinations,and what Hannibal might have twisted and manipulated, was devilishly tricky. He had encouraged the fire in Will's brain and pushed him into believing he'd lost his sanity, embraced the demons represented by Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Had the plan always been to gaslight Will into believing he killed not just Abigail and her father, but the other copycat victims, too? Given the lures, almost certainly.

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"I'm sorry I can't help you." Abigail's voice floated through the walls late in the afternoon. The sound arrived distorted, but her voice was unmistakable. Will didn't blame her for being unable to help. The dead couldn't do anything but haunt his conscience.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep you safe." He knew he shouldn't be engaging with his hallucinations, but the isolation was wearing him down. Will worried about his dogs, tried to imagine his pack curled up on the bed and floor around him. He knew Alana would see them re-homed. Even if she believed the lie, her compassion towards his dogs would remain. He had to believe that. "I should have seen him for what he was. I should have told Alana to take you somewhere safer."

"I... I trusted him too, and," Abigail objected slowly, hesitantly. "I didn't know everything, but I knew enough. Way before you did."

Will sat up, careful against the dizziness brought about by low blood sugar. He conjured the girl as he remembered her. Eyes filled with warning, distrust. She looked at everyone that way until she figured out how to charm them. He put his detailed memory to use, envisioning red hair framing those eyes. Her scar was clearly visible, but she showed no shame.

He'd always been able to imagine in vivid detail. He'd brought dead people back to life so many times. Only to reconstruct, though. This, this was a step he hadn't taken before. Might

not even have considered it before he got sick. Will shook hands with his madness and offered it a canvas. That was fine. He was doing it for Abigail.

Abigail, who acted as her father's bait, because it was them or her. She had tried to warn Will and Alana, the only way her fear and survival instinct allowed.

"You can be the man on the phone."

Will got to his feet and stepped closer to the wounded bird Hannibal had crushed. Had he ever cared about her? No. No, of course not. Will saw a flash of Abigail's throat opening. The man doing it blurred between Hobbs and Lecter. He saw her ear in his sink, covered in bile, barely dissolved aspirin floating in the wreckage.

Will leaned against the door with his eyes closed, sliding down it to sit on the floor rather than fall or throw up nothing. When he opened his eyes again, Abigail was crouched in front of him, eyes close and searching, always searching.

"You tried to tell us," Will spoke with a weary regret. "When you killed Nick Boyle, and he helped you cover it up? Hannibal told me you'd hang for it, no matter what the truth was. He was right, but it was nowhere near the whole truth." Will hated himself for not seeing it sooner. "Hannibal was the Sword of Damocles, hovering over your head. Kept you under his power until you were more useful dead." Will paused, considering. "Maybe you saw enough of him to be a threat, maybe you were just more useful to him as my victim. The one lie I would have believed, with your father stuck in my head."

Will sighed, exhausted. None of it mattered anyway, if he was going to starve to death in this hollowed out corpse of a room. There was an aching period of quiet. Abigail was gone from his vision, and Will couldn't decide if he'd rather be alone or hallucinating.

"We *can* survive this." Abigail's voice vibrated through Will's skull like a struck tuning fork. "Just.. please, don't mention me."

The tide of sound receded, leaving Will stranded on its shore. Abigail's voice did not return. Her words didn't entirely make sense, but she *was* a ghost. Still, he supposed Hannibal would continue to drive away any comfort and solace that Will could find. If he wasn't dead, or in cuffs and refusing to say a word.

Will's guts twitched, dancing like little rubber bands in his belly. He might consider eating a person in a few days, if offered. He was so hungry already. Although, if that was the plan, he'd just have to take a bite out of Hannibal instead. Either way, he wouldn't give up Abigail. Even though she wasn't real, he still owed it to her.

He whispered his oath into the air, like a prayer.

"I promise. I won't fail you again."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not thrilled with the first half to three-quarters of this chapter. I hacked and slashed and edited many times, and at this point I just need to move on.

More of Hannibal going forward, promise.

Also, updates will still be sporadic, but the next part should be a shorter wait than this one was.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Hannibal returns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early in Will's third day without food, Hannibal Lecter returned. Will didn't have the energy to do much, but he summoned what little he had to sit up. If he needed to defend himself, adrenaline would give him a brief chance.

Instead of the food Will was desperate for, Hannibal carried a newspaper.

"The answers to some of your questions." Hannibal placed one end of the neatly folded paper into Will's palm. The print smelled fresh. Hot off the presses metaphorically, if not actually warm to touch. Will clenched it in his grasp reflexively, momentarily stunned by the crinkle beneath his fingers. When he looked back up, Hannibal was slipping out of sight. The door closed behind him.

Time stopped. Will held his breath as the world ceased to spin.

Then he unfolded the newspaper and found his own face scowling up from the front page.

Chesapeake *Ripper Leaves FBI a Parting Insult*

(As reported by Freddie Lounds for TattleCrime.com)

Disgraced Special Agent William Graham, now better known as the infamous Chesapeake Ripper, has escaped from FBI custody twice in as many weeks. Before his most recent escape, authorities believed he was only responsible for the so-called Copycat Killings. Some of his former colleagues had previously attempted to defend his actions, citing physical illness as pushing the unstable former professor over the edge. Those defenses have vanished entirely, now that Graham has revealed his full identity in grisly fashion.

We can now confirm that the remains of missing FBI Trainee Miriam Lass have been discovered outside the home of Agent Jack Crawford, head of the Behavioural Sciences Unit. The FBI has been tight-lipped with details, but this reporter can confirm that Agent Crawford has been relieved of his command while his superiors asses the situation.

“ Agent Lass’s murder and the mutilation of her corpse was a deliberate, personal attack against both Agent Crawford and the FBI as a whole,” Special Investigator Kade Prurnell said in an exclusive statement. “ Given the results of his initial psychological screening, just allowing him to teach was a risk; putting him into the field was a massive error in judgment. ”

The latest reports suggest that, after leaving his former colleagues the brutal parting gift, Graham travelled from Crawford’s home to the coast. There he stole a boat and vanished out to sea. Of course, one has to wonder just how hard the FBI has been searching for their fallen agent. After all, the true depths of the FBI’s incompetence may never see the light of day if Graham avoids capture. This reporter will not rest until she has provided the full undisguised truth.

For a full history of Will Graham’s instability and alarming behaviour at crime scenes, see page 3. For the timeline of the Chesapeake Ripper’s kills, see page 6...

Will hurled the paper to the side, the pages flying apart and fluttering to the ground. He refused to read another word. He’d seen enough. If Jack suspected Hannibal at all, if anyone had even looked at the Ripper timeline and not just seen Lass’s corpse and made assumptions, it was a well kept secret. Will could hope that Jack suspected, or that his potential replacement would, but he couldn’t rely on that possibility. As far as he knew, Jack believed the lies and had given up on Will entirely. Any replacement would, as Lounds suggested, be more likely to sweep it all under the rug. Hannibal made his point. They were looking for Will, but not to rescue him, and not in the right direction.

He wondered how Hannibal had faked Will’s supposed trail so convincingly, but he didn’t doubt the man’s capabilities. No, he wouldn’t be underestimating Hannibal Lecter again.

When the man in question returned to Will’s room, he was once again carrying a tray full of food. His eyes flicked briefly to the pages scattered across the floor, but did not linger. This time, he placed the tray down without turning his back to Will. It was all the proof Will needed to confirm his theory. Last time had been an invitation to violence.

“I must apologize for abandoning you these last few days.” He straightened, standing tall with his impeccable posture. Hannibal smoothed down his tie, and Will briefly contemplated taking that bait. The fucker was being intentionally cocky. He knew Will had little strength in him. “Necessary, but terribly rude of me.”

Will snorted at that. He didn’t just refuse to hide his derision, he actively emphasized it. Hannibal simply continued on.

“Will you join me for breakfast, or does your pride demand that you starve for longer?” He spoke with a calm surface of neutrality. Will suspected that, while the man would prefer a relatively peaceful meal together, he was more than content to leave Will to suffer if he must. The doctor had probably already worked out exactly how long it would take for Will’s body to shut down without food. All of it smelled like half-truths and massive sins of omission, but Will was so weak and hungry, the choice wasn’t much of one.

He gritted his teeth and swayed up to his feet. He let his anger and disgust curl in his spine, watching and waiting, as he showed Hannibal nothing but disdain and the uncontrollable pangs of hunger. Will dropped harder than he intended into the seat closest to the bed. It was jarring, but he refused to show how much.

Hannibal quirked the smallest hint of a pleased smile.

“I confess to feeling a bit nostalgic,” he said as he lifted the lid off the tray. The food was simple and utterly horrifying. Protein scramble. The first meal Hannibal ever cooked him. The first time Will ate part of a human being.

“And *who* are we eating?” He asked it as blandly as he could, but his weak muscles were vibrating in a cyclone of emotions. That morning had once been a pleasant memory. Never again.

“Does it matter?” Hannibal inquired, hooded eyes fixed on Will’s reaction.

“You know it does.” Will focused on the knot of Hannibal’s tie. He pictured how satisfying it would be to choke the bastard with it. Watch him gasp for breath, lips turning blue and expression perhaps, for once, unmasked.

“We are dining on literal pork, today.” Hannibal answered after a moment. “Perhaps it will provide some small comfort for you to know, I expected the FBI to search my home after your accusations. Thus, my pantry is entirely bare.”

“Implying that they didn’t,” Will muttered, half under his breath. Hannibal tilted his head a fraction in acknowledgement. Evidently, he didn’t see the need to press on that wound. The quiet confirmation was damning enough.

The silence stretched. Like with all the meals he served, Hannibal waited for Will to take the first bite. Will considered the dish before him, familiar and yet entirely foreign, then met Hannibal’s gaze with determination, trying to drive past the walls that kept the truth concealed.

“So not Miriam Lass, then.”

Hannibal’s lips twitched ever so slightly. The suggestion was offensive?

“Miss Lass was a lovely, bright, capable young woman,” Hannibal praised her virtues in a way that seemed genuine. “If she hadn’t discovered the truth, I would never have harmed her.” He paused, his stare taking Will apart, examining the pieces. “She was certainly no pig.”

A flash, and Will felt transported back to his classroom. He woke up from a dream, although waking up wasn’t quite the right term, though he’d definitely been asleep. He was with Abigail and Cassie Boyle’s corpse, and then he blinked and light assaulted his eyes as Dr. Lecter’s voice pierced his attention.

The Chesapeake Ripper’s photo gallery scattered across the table. Staring at them had yielded no new insight that evening. Hannibal, perfectly composed, payed them little attention at

first. It wasn't until Will mentioned bad dreams that he seemed to take in the assemblage of body parts.

" What do you see, doctor?"

He'd been so desperate for any clue or insight that could help get inside the Ripper's head, help find him. Even if he hadn't been desperate, Hannibal had proved to be both insightful and an excellent sounding board. Of course the Chesapeake Ripper could provide insight into the mind of a killer. He was intimately familiar with his own, after all.

" Sum up the Ripper in so many words?"

"Choose them wisely, doctor."

"Oh, I always do." Lecter replied as he scanned through the photos. "Words are living things. They have personality, point of view, agenda."

Will felt a smile cross his lips for a moment. He enjoyed the sentiment and swiftly spoke his agreement.

"They're pack hunters."

Together, words can achieve far more than apart. It was one of the many thoughts Will often had that confused others. That sort of jump in association and metaphor usually baffled those he talked to. Not Hannibal. At most, he was curious about how the dots connected, but he never questioned that there was solid reasoning behind Will's words. More often than not, Hannibal understood with a depth and complexity that both enthralled and gave a twist of fear in the gut. Will was used to fear, bathed in it on a near daily basis. A drop so small had virtually gone unnoticed.

Hannibal's first comments, regardless of if he had a specific design, elicited more details on Will's existing insights into the Ripper, and neatly prevented the rise of any suspicion, should he know things he shouldn't. A master class in deception.

"... a public shaming." Will explained.

" T akes their organs away because in his mind, they don't deserve them." Hannibal turned to face Will as he finished his theory. A theory that set Will back on his heels with how insightful it was. On its own, it wouldn't be much help, but it set Will's mind buzzing with possibility.

Only then, when Will was reeling with revelation, did Hannibal stick his proverbial toe in the water. He pulled out the photo of Lass's arm, cellphone in hand.

"*She's not like the other victims." Will explained with a sigh. "The Ripper had no reason to humiliate Miriam Lass."*

"Seems to me he was humiliating someone?"

" He was humiliating Jack."

"Did it work?"

No suspicion at all. Sly fucker.

"I'd say it worked really *well."*

Hannibal seemed to consider, nodded, and returned the photo.

There Will was, spilling state secrets to public enemy number one. How hard was it for Hannibal to not smile at that? Perhaps Jack couldn't see the truth because it's one humiliation too many for the man?

Later that night, so late it was practically morning, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, close to the investigation, smart, methodical, bared toned forearms as he kept a man alive with nothing but his hands. The former surgeon to the rescue. Will should have seen it then. All the pieces were together. All that he lacked was suspicion.

Hannibal shifted his glance from the victim's body, turning to look over at Will. It was perhaps the most intense look Hannibal had ever displayed in Will's presence. There was a storm of emotions swirling in there, just beneath the surface. He could almost see within it, swim to his depths and finally grasp the doctor's elusive core.

Lecter looked away again too quickly, back to his patient. Whatever Will had seen, whatever his mind had been reaching for, it slipped away. Maybe he didn't want to see it. Maybe seeing too much would drive away the one person he'd really been able to connect with.

Maybe the truth had been too painful to consider.

Will would like to blame the encephalitis for shuttering his eyes. Except, he hadn't been so impaired then. He'd seen Hannibal as a friend, even if he wouldn't admit it to anyone. Will had never felt so understood and accepted. If he was going to survive his current ordeal, he needed to face reality. It wasn't just the obvious betrayal that wounded him. The agony of Abigail's death overwhelmed and concealed the truth. Will hadn't *just* trusted Hannibal Lecter as a psychiatrist. He'd enjoyed their time together, he'd liked him. A fact that either made him blind, delusional, or perhaps something much worse.

Will blinked away the past, then picked up his spoon, the only cutlery on offer, with his left hand and awkwardly dug in. There was no hiding how he'd frozen as his mind worked, but he could act like nothing happened. Eating with his left was challenging, but he didn't have the energy to mess with the sling. The meal was as delicious as he'd expected, and he tried not to let it show, but Hannibal's flash of smugness let him know he failed. Will forced himself to take small, slow bites, so as not to overload his empty stomach. He believed Hannibal about the meat. It fit his growing understanding of the killer's pathology.

"If I survive this, I think I'll become a vegetarian." He said it somewhat without thinking, but knew the statement would annoy Lecter.

"That would be a shame," Hannibal replied with unexpected amusement. "Perhaps you've made incorrect assumptions about why you're here."

Will swallowed the second to last bite of his meal without chewing properly, and tried desperately not to choke. Hannibal must have noticed, but didn't comment.

"Why don't you enlighten me, then?" Will coughed around the words as he recovered. Small motions and sounds, but still obvious. He had new theories growing and branching like weeds in the back of his mind, but any additional information would help.

Hannibal's neutral but contemplative posture would not have been out of place in one of their therapy sessions. When he crossed one leg over another, the comparison was unavoidable. It irked Will in a way that he couldn't let blind his survival instincts.

"You have the knowledge and the tools to find enlightenment yourself," Hannibal offered. "We must discover some truths for ourselves."

Will snorted derisively. "Bullshit."

Hannibal didn't blink, but a soft huff of air left his nose, and Will could taste his disappointment.

"You destroyed my life, *Hannibal*." He spit the name, gratified by how the bastard narrowed his eyes. "You took my deepest fears, my *trust,* and you used them to try and shatter me into pieces!" Will wasn't certain when he got to his feet. He simply discovered that he was standing. Hannibal, calm as ever, remained as he was. "I told you. I *know* who I am. Whatever you have planned isn't going to change that."

Hannibal gazed up at him, unreadable.

“How often have you pictured yourself killing me, Will?” Hannibal paused, but when Will failed to answer after a moment, he continued on. “Would it be easier to ask when you are not?”

A low growl escaped Will’s throat, unbidden.

“Metamorphosis is a brutal process for the caterpillar. Their bodies dissolve into little more than soup before they rebuild themselves. Only after they break down can they begin to reach their true potential.”

Will narrowed his eyes, filled with suspicion and doubt.

“You can’t possibly be suggesting that *any* of this has been for my benefit.” The words lacked power. They were limp, disbelieving, and yet... Everything Hannibal did was transformative, theatrical. His ultimate results are just not something anyone else would appreciate. Brutal and bloody, the displays he left behind were elegant in a way that only the like-minded could see and appreciate. Will didn’t want to see the beauty in it. That he could, and so easily, was what fuelled much of his self-loathing.

“Prison was supposed to be your chrysalis,” Hannibal continued with practiced calm. “Instead we are here, together.”

“That implies freedom beyond the chrysalis,” Will pointed out, holding his body in check. He was weak, but the blatant (intentional) openings Hannibal left with his movements were so very tempting. The tie dangled in pure temptation.

“Not every creature survives the process,” Hannibal explained as he stood and picked up the emptied tray. “The end result has no guarantees, but the freedom of flight is their reward.”

“Freedom as you envision it, you mean.” Will shot back. “Whatever your plan is, I promise you, there *will* be a reckoning. For Abigail, if nothing else.”

“I look forward to it,” Hannibal replied with undisguised pleasure. Then he left.

Will struggled to hold in a scream. He tried to keep from lashing out; struggling with the urge to punch or kick something. Eventually, he tossed the pillows from his bed as hard and as far as he could. Though mildly satisfying, the act felt juvenile, pathetic.

As the adrenaline faded, so did Will.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the continued support.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Conversation over dinner, with a dollop of nightmares.

Chapter Notes

So I briefly forgot about Will's injured shoulder. Whoops! I went back to the last chapter and decided I really only needed to tweak one paragraph. So if you read it before this, and notice a change, that's it.

The love I've been getting for this is still insane. Thank you all so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a brief, dreamless nap, Will woke to the clear skies and the tease of evergreen branches out his only portal to the outside. The skylight was small, and though it was a painful reminder, it also brought Will a moment of calm before he could no longer hold back the avalanche of worries. Before he had to face a world in which Dr Hannibal Lecter, friend, enemy, The Chesapeake Ripper, The Copycat, cannibal, and so much more, had decided that Will Graham needed to be broken down and rebuilt *for his own good.*

Will could process the concept of being manipulated, betrayed, framed. He knew what sadism felt like from the inside. Most serial killers had compulsions, plenty of them nursed rage. He appreciated theatricality, the desire to be known, make a name for one's self. Killers might fixate on their victims; stalking them before killing or kidnapping, sometimes hunting them for long periods of time. The rare intelligent psychopaths had talent for blending in. None had ever blended in like Dr. Hannibal Lecter. His masking was impeccable. Will now knew he only saw the hints of darkness because Hannibal wanted him to; because sharing that darkness had been the only way to get Will to trust him.

Some killers try to make their victims into what they want. The victims are always part of a pattern, even when hard to see, and they die because they can never be what the killer truly wants. Something causes them to be discarded, and the killer gets a new one. The cycle repeats. Will knows he can't be the first Hannibal has nudged into violence, but he's also terrifyingly certain that Hannibal was too careful, until Will, to do more than nudge and manipulate.

The clues fell into place, and Will couldn't ignore them any longer. The bone-chilling reality was that it wasn't all an act. Will was rapidly gaining clarity on Hannibal's twisted concept of

friendship. At some point, maybe when he said it out loud, maybe long after, Hannibal genuinely started seeing Will as a friend. Which meant Will had to stop seeing everything they went through as fake, and process whatever the fuck that fact meant.

Will's thoughts are hardly pleasant at the best of times. His blood-soaked brain is vivid and unrelenting, and still he wants nothing more than to imagine himself back home. His dogs would act out and pile onto the bed with him. Cold noses, slobbering tongues, and all the fur, warmth and uncomplicated love a person could wish for. He would softly tell them off, but not actually order them away. The pack smelled like home, safety.

Before he could immerse himself in the fantasy, at least until his brain insisted he dwell on reality again, that reality demanded his attention like a knife to his throat as the lock clicked open and the door followed.

Will sat up carefully, briefly forgetting that his arm was bound in a sling, and ungracefully swapping to his left arm to raise himself upwards. He bid farewell to the trees and the scents of home. Soft things and comforts wouldn't serve him when faced with Hannibal Lecter. The chain rattled so softly it almost tinkled. The sound was offensive to his ears.

Hannibal entered, dressed in the same three-piece suit as before, and carrying another covered tray. Will had slept until dinner, then. Hannibal placed it on the table with exacting precision, before he straightened and turned his gaze to Will. He raised an eyebrow in question, and Will stifled a sigh before standing. The earlier meal had helped him feel somewhat more human, though his digestion was already uneasy. Food meant strength, and discussions with Hannibal brought insights Will needed to survive. Will dropped into the seat, reinforcing his internal barriers as he did so.

"Winter chicken salad with hot honey dressing," Hannibal announced as he removed the cover from their meals. "A colourful winter salad that exemplifies the best of the season's produce: oranges, pomegranate, dried chillies and radicchio, with just enough mint to awaken the palette."

It was no surprise that the meal looked amazing. The bright red leaves, the orange slices and the green mint stood out, but somehow also enhanced the appeal of the chicken. It looked like chicken. It was probably chicken. Will considered asking, but the answer wouldn't change anything. Unless, of course, Hannibal admitted to it being human. The only surprise was the cutlery. Apparently, Will was being trusted, or tempted, with a fork and a butter knife for this meal. A test, a goad, a courtesy, or perhaps all three. Given the sling, it definitely felt more like a taunt.

Will gave the entire situation the silent finger. He shrugged off the sling, pointedly ignoring the pain of the unsupported movements, picked up the utensils, and dug in. He carefully ignored Hannibal. The meal was as delicious as expected, but this time he kept any signs of enjoyment on lockdown. He couldn't look at Hannibal to see if the front worked, but after a moment he heard the other man eat and, with irritation, Will could hear amusement in the air. Whether he should be angry at Hannibal for that feeling, or himself, he wasn't sure.

He got through most of his meal before Hannibal finally spoke again.

“I have decided to take a break from my work with my patients,” Dr. Lecter declared into the silence.

Will swallowed his mouthful of orange and chicken, carefully and deliberately.

“It must have taken a toll on you,” Will returned with weighty sarcasm. “What with your patient turning out to be the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Hmm,” Hannibal acknowledged. “Not just a patient, but a friend.”

Will snorted, then took his last bite of protein, chewing it slowly. If he was going to piss off his captor, at least he’d get all the nutrients and energy he could first.

“Someone you trusted,” he spoke as evenly as he could, but his voice still cracked and strained with suppressed emotion. A hurricane beating down on his fortresses. “Betrayal like that? There’s no recovery.”

Silence shrouded them. One wrong word, and Will knew he would do something reckless, futile. The tie was within striking distance once more. It might be worth it, even doomed to fail. The knife was little more than useless, but a fork to the eye would slow the man down. None of it was a realistic option, with his shoulder so stiff and his body still weak. Hannibal had to be studying him, watching like the predator he was. They waited in sharp silence until Will sagged. He was still weak and healing. He leaned against the back of his chair. It wasn’t much, but it was enough for Hannibal.

“The trust you placed in a psychiatrist, or a friend?”

Will scoffed. He understood enough now to know that was an answer he was going to make Hannibal pay for. Let him work for it while Will got the answers he wanted. He slipped the sling back on, glad for the support, and happy to make Hannibal wait.

“What about Abigail’s trust?” Of all Hannibal’s betrayals, Abigail’s murder sat right at the top. “Did she trust you before she died?” Will leaned forward, just enough to be perfectly clear. He bared his teeth and let his hatred and loathing loose on the room. “She recognized your voice.” It wasn’t a question. “Was it fear that kept her quiet, or the fantasy that you would protect her?”

“I imagine it was both.” Hannibal replied without hesitation. “Garrett Jacob Hobbs was her father, and fathers traditionally protect their families. Still, she was afraid of him, and wisely so.” Hannibal tried for eye contact, but Will avoided it. “You evoked similar feelings. Fate, perhaps, that our lives collided?”

“Pretty shit destiny.” Will countered with a snap. “You don’t believe in fate, anyway.” He could see it now with perfect clarity. “You make your own fate, right?”

“Abigail certainly saw her future. Uncle Jack was going to arrest her. She wasn’t likely to survive on her own, nor evade capture.”

“So you slit her throat to save your own ass. Two birds with one stone. One dead potential snitch, and I take the fall.”

“She had to die. It was the only logical choice.”

Despite the certainty Will felt behind the words, there was annoyance wafting off of Hannibal. The details slipped into the shadows too quickly to grasp, but it was enough.

“You really don’t care that she’s dead,” Will accused after he processed this. It wasn’t exactly a revelation, but somehow it was still a blow. “Of course you don’t. Even if we aren’t pigs to be slaughtered, we’re all still animals. Lesser. Your narcissism wouldn’t allow anyone to come close to the same species.”

The nearly impenetrable mask was back. Hannibal gave the appearance of consideration, before finally making the offer.

“Another exchange, then? Insight into the few I have genuinely cared for, and in return you answer my much simpler question. Which was the bigger betrayal, that of the psychiatrist or the friend?”

Will made his own appearance of consideration. The balance of the exchange seemed more in Will’s favour. Hannibal must see it differently, and that was worrisome, but refusing gained Will nothing.

“Fine. You first.”

Hannibal nodded, adjusting his position slightly, laying one leg over the other. It was a convincing show of carefully organizing his thoughts.

“I had a sister.” Hannibal always chose his words carefully, but these were even more precise. “I was more like a father to her, than a brother.”

“Had?”

“She died,” Hannibal confirmed, his own gaze wandering as he spoke.

Will drank in the information. He wondered what happened to the sister and their parents, and how it moulded the monster before him. He wanted to ask a dozen questions, but he knew he was getting all Hannibal was currently willing to share. So Will catalogued the information, stored it away, and resolved to work out how it fit at a later time. It felt like the truth, but either way, she was still a girl that had died too young. Like Abigail. It could be a manipulation, but Will didn’t think it was. Leaving off her name felt like a small way to protect the sister he couldn’t save.

“My Aunt, the Lady Murasaki, had a profound effect on me. My uncle took me in out of obligation to his dead brother, but Lady Murasaki was more.” Hannibal continued smoothly, the tension he’d held only evident as it relaxed a fraction. The sister was a much more sensitive subject than the aunt. “There are others I have respected, valued as individuals with

talent. Certainly not animals, as you put it. Alana Bloom, for example. Slaughtering her would be a terrible shame."

Will narrowed his eyes, heart compressing slightly at the statement that definitely doubled as a threat, should such threats become necessary. Hannibal leaned forward slightly, and this time Will found himself trapped in those deep and endless eyes.

"How can one compare to a memory? Naturally, there was no one I considered anywhere near my sister's level of importance."

Will still wasn't entirely sure what was real, and what was fiction, but he caught the shift in tense. Still, he wasn't about to play Hannibal's game, or let him drive the conversation where he wanted it.

"None of this matters," Will said instead. He intentionally waved off Hannibal's statements with his good arm, as if they were meaningless. Will knew they weren't, but he fought to close himself off, to not empathize. He didn't need to know that the monster had such human feelings, not while he was in the room. There was a time when it could have mattered, made a difference. He could admit that much to himself. "You murdered our-" Will bit his tongue against the words that had sounded crazy even before. "Abigail is *dead*. You killed her."

At a glance, Hannibal's expression had not changed. His psychiatrist face was a well practiced one. It showed interest with no other reaction until he wished otherwise.

"Quid pro quo, William." There was a fresh edge to his voice. One that reminded Will that the rules of their game must be respected. That Will was standing on a ledge, with dire consequences should he fall off.

"Did you really need to ask?" Will shrugged reflexively, a dismissal he didn't feel. The motion pulled at his bullet wound, eliciting a wince. "You know my feelings about psychiatrists. Just because you aren't as clumsy as the rest, doesn't mean..." Will trailed off, shuffling his thoughts and feelings. It was too easy to be vulnerable. He had to answer truthfully, but it didn't need to be the whole truth. "We talked about being fathers to Abigail. I came to you before anyone else, when I was struggling, but you put a lot of effort into making me dependent on you." Will clenched his fists, grabbing the fabric of his pants and trying not to shake at the effort. "Maybe in another life we could have been friends. Now? Now the light of friendship won't reach us for a million years. You did that. You spilled any chance we could be *friendly* on the floor when you opened Abigail's throat."

"Not by being the Chesapeake Ripper?" Hannibal inquired in a carefully flat tone. "Or any of the rest?"

Will let out a disbelieving laugh. "I guess you'll never know." He definitely wouldn't go into detail, not without a damn good reason.

"Occasionally I drop a teacup to the floor just to see it shatter," Hannibal replied softly, after a pause. "I'm disappointed when it doesn't pick itself up and come back together."

Will barely stopped himself from shrugging dismissively again, but only to avoid the pain. “God complex. Nothing new, there.” Sure, he shouldn’t poke the monster, but Abigail’s death was Will’s line, his barricade, the walls of his fortress. He wouldn’t let even the smallest chip be knocked from that wall. He couldn’t do that to Abigail. It was the last way he could protect her. The only way he could repent for failing her so utterly.

Hannibal, it seemed, was undeterred. Not surprising, Will supposed. He had already chosen to ignore Will’s rudeness. He rose to his feet, covering the tray.

“You’ve been in the heads of many killers with god complexes,” Hannibal commented, with a lightness to his tone. “Perhaps you might consider whether your saviour complex is all that different.” Lecter didn’t wait for a response, leaving Will alone with his thoughts.

Will was coming to hate being alone with his thoughts.

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Will Graham spent much of his time imagining ways to get the jump on Hannibal, to kill him or just to escape. Either was acceptable. If he left Hannibal alive behind him, he’d just have to do what the newspaper said and actually go into hiding. Maybe one day he’d return bearing righteous vengeance, or maybe he’d find somewhere quiet and hide away from the world, find some peace for once. He could fix boat motors, fish, and take in new strays. He wouldn’t be able to risk looking for the pack he left behind. No matter how much he loved and missed them.

Thinking about any of that was dangerous, be it violence or a peaceful future. Will gathered up the scattered newspaper pages. Reading about the outside world suddenly felt much safer than dwelling in his own thoughts. He placed the sheets in order, and then set to reading everything but the Lounds article. The snatches of the outside world were both comforting and infuriating, but they gave his mind something to focus on. Something that wasn’t being a captive. Not the pain of finally finding someone who understood him, someone who liked and understood the man Will really was. The paper, if he avoided the article that condemned him, wasn’t soaked with the blood of betrayal.

The more he thought about Hannibal’s choice to frame him, and he’d had a lot of time to think, the more it made logical sense. Will’s reputation hadn’t been great even before Freddie Lounds started attacking him. For a long time, he really hadn’t cared. He taught his students, and they mostly didn’t like him, but they learned and left his class armed with the knowledge needed to work for the FBI. He equipped them to do the job that Will had been deemed too unstable for. Until Jack Crawford decided Will Graham’s stability was secondary to catching his killers.

All of that was easier to think on than the reason Will’s simmering wrath was unquenchable. **Abigail.** Why kill Abigail? Did Hannibal see his control over her slipping? Had her life and death been dangling from Will’s hands since they saved her from her father? Was Hannibal’s

fatherly affection entirely fake? Had he seen in her eyes the things she'd done to survive Hobbs? Was she merely a way to hold power over Will until her death sealed his fate? If Lecter were a typical psychopath, the answers would be easy. Typical psychopaths didn't care about anyone except as tools. If Hannibal had really cared about his sister, had he seen any of her in Abigail? Would it have mattered if he did?

Whatever Hannibal may or may not have felt, it hadn't stopped him from taking a blade to her throat. Will envisioned Abigail's expression in the moments before her death in a multitude of variations. They all made Will's heart ache. He knew he never deserved to be anywhere near Abigail's life. Maybe it *was* too much of Garret Jacob Hobbs in his head. On that basis alone, he should have stayed the hell away. Still, Will's feelings towards Abigail had always leaned parental, protective. Abigail felt like a daughter to him. The reason didn't matter.

Hannibal Lecter took her away.

Hannibal must have followed them to Minnesota. He found Abigail, terrified after the encephalitis hit its peak and Will lost himself, lost swathes of time. Will could vividly visualize Hannibal offering calm and safety to the frightened young woman. Not that it mattered if she saw his intent. He was stronger, faster, and he wielded a blade smoothly and efficiently. A knife that easily parted the flesh of her throat. Will has pictured it before. Hannibal follows the scar line with medical precision. Blood gushes forth, arterial spray hits the walls while more simply pours down to soak her shirt. Abigail looks resigned. Her legs fold and she falls heavily to the floor, gasping for air and the life that is pooling around her.

Will owed Hannibal Lecter a reckoning. That was indisputable.

The only mystery, other than what happened to Abigail's corpse, was how her ear ended up in Will's stomach. He coughed, a reaction to the sense memory of her ear coming back out. His throat felt raw, aching.

Will blinked, finding the newspaper bunched and crinkled in his grip.

He tried to focus on an innocuous fluff piece. Reading the words, memorizing them, dissecting them. But as the lights went out, and Will tried to make himself sleep, the story about the T-ball team's charity fundraiser vanished. His mind filled once more with Ripper crime scenes and moments spent with Hannibal, from comfortable to infuriating.

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Before the encephalitis, Will rarely remembered his dreams. His forts had been strong, but the inflammation and fever had melted the walls. The dreams Will used to have were vivid, but he could instinctively banish the nightmares before they became truly horrific. With the encephalitis, his dreams contained raven-feathered stags, lakes of blood, monsters, tsunamis, and endless suffering. He hadn't had time to consider how his brain might function once he

recovered. The fever was gone, but some changes felt permanent. The dreams were steadier, a more focused jumble of his subconscious, but their detail and intensity had not faded.

Will sat at a table, darkness shrouding nearly everything from view. He looked down at the place setting, familiar. In the centre of the plate was a beating heart, spurting blood with every beat, and yet never running dry. Will picked up a knife and fork, slicing off a portion. He felt the gash deep within his own chest and looked down to find his ribs pried open, jutting out. An empty void where his heart should be. A void that sucked pulled at him from the inside, consuming him from within.

“Gods demand sacrifice.” Hannibal’s voice, stalking in the darkness. “Greedy for any form of devotion.”

Steady hands formed from strands of black, lifting Will’s heart off the plate with care. Arms and face pulled out from the dark that wrapped his features like clingfilm. Hannibal smiled, the gesture tearing at the darkness which flaked away to reveal the man underneath. Will could feel his hands cupping the organ, gentle yet firm, and he felt steady. Hannibal raised Will’s heart, inspecting, admiring, before leaning forward to lick a stripe from bottom to top. Will felt it in his chest like hot spices on his tongue, burning without truly hurting, but still more pain than was comfortable.

Light pulsed rhythmically out from the empty plate. It mimicked the beat of a racing heart. The flashes were blinding, and something about them terrified Will down to his core. He wanted the darkness back again.

“Pigs are preferable as sacrifices. Inferior, but without waste.”

Will stared up at those amused, blood-stained lips. He blinked against the light, but couldn’t raise his hand to block it. His arms hung uselessly against his sides. His chest still burned, but he knew there was a conflagration waiting to explode.

“Hmmm,” Hannibal assessed Will’s leaking heart as it beat in his hands. Will felt the rapid beat in his core, but the organ cradled in Hannibal’s steady hands beat slowly, calmly. “You need more time to cook.”

Before Will could even think to react, Hannibal turned and used his crimson drenched fingers to shove Will’s heart back into his chest. The forced propelled Will backward, his chair tipping until he plunged into frigid waters. He flailed, searched for the vanished ground, lost until somehow he broke through to the surface.

Will stood in the rush of water, a churning river all around him. He had no waders, and the current tugged at his ankles. The sky rapidly darkened as the wind whipped at his hair, small strands stinging his flesh. A storm roared in the distance, though rapidly gaining ground. All it would take was the slightest slip, and Will would be lost. He blinked against the gusts of wind and water, desperate to find shore. The wave of tall grasses beckoned him forward, and he pressed towards them. Each step was a perilous chance to slip on a slick rock or get mired in the silty bottom.

The waving that beckoned him forth shifted colour as he approached, from green to red, grass to hair and wind-chafed skin. Abigail stood before him, looking down at Will with sadness and pity. Her throat opened up, no blade in sight. Darkness swarmed around them, but the blood that flowed from her veins, down her front, shone like rubies. Will reached up for her throat to close the wound, but she grabbed his wrist and tore his hand away. He couldn't fight her. She had all the power.

"I don't need you to save me." Abigail spoke with a smile. It emerged soft, but turned hard and fragile. "I don't *want* you to save me." Her skin was nearly pure white from blood loss, and yet it continue to flow from her gaping throat, sparkling in the dark. Spurts matched the beat of a heart that should be still. "You're in over your head."

A surge of current pulled Will's feet out from under him. He plunged into dark, rushing waters, submerged in an instant. The cold enveloped him, and all light vanished as the river swept him away. Down and down, down into the darkness and beyond, pits of of suffering, pools of blood and fire, and then a cold that penetrated down to his marrow. Will floated, lost in what might as well be the empty void of space. His atoms slowing as he reached absolute zero, the flickering of a distant light chased away entirely by the deepest of blacks.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter should be fun. ^_^

Comments fuel my creativity! Much love for everyone who has left one.

[LibreOffice does weird shit with my spacing sometimes. Feel free to point out any such errors so I can fix them.]

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will has a very emotional morning.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning! : Panic attack

Note: My computer gave me a lot of trouble getting this on to AO3 with proper formatting. Naturally, it was the panic attack scene, something to do with with all the formatting shifts, I guess. So if the formatting looks off, or it seems like a lost a paragraph or two in there somewhere, please let me know. This got copied over in fragments and errors may have been made.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will struggled out of his nightmares. Frozen limbs stubbornly refused to move, convinced the dark room was still the frigid void. His teeth chattered as his frame shook with cold. It was only as the moon emerged from behind a cloud, bathing the room in its faint glow, that Will was certain he was awake. Though not drenched in sweat, his clothes were damp and adding to a chill that seemed to radiate out from his bones. He must have kicked off his blanket in his sleep, as his desperate grasps for it found nothing. The ice in his marrow was impossible to ignore, and the allure of a hot shower was likewise irresistible.

Shivering and shaking, with a supreme effort of resolve, Will stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom. He felt inside the shower for the dial and turned it all the way into the red. Thinking of nothing but warming himself, he fumbled with the shirt buttons. His fingers shook with his attempt to manoeuvre something so small and precise, and when his initial efforts to pull the thing off over his head got caught up on the sling, he swore and gave up. The pants were much easier to take off, even though they were too tight on him. The damning zipper came undone with ease. As he shook off the sweats, he considered attempting to navigate the sling, but the water was already warming and his shaking was only getting worse. Cursing once more, he stepped under the flow.

The water was only beginning to get hot, but it was far warmer than he was. It soaked through the shirt in moments and as the heat grew, Will's teeth calmed and his limbs trembled less and less. The shower steamed, and Will bowed his head, letting the heat pound against the back of his neck. It took a long time for the warmth to soak in and calm his convulsions entirely. By then, the lights were on and he nudged the shower door as closed as it would go.

Since the chain blocked it from shutting properly, it didn't add a terrible amount of privacy, especially with the clear panelled door. Still, with the steam fogging it up, it provided some protection.

Will turned the heat down from scalding, but left the water running pleasantly hot. His legs shook again, but this time not from the cold. He slid down the wall, sitting under the rainfall, and focused on his breathing.

Waking up from nightmares, sweating and shivering, was nothing new, but with the fever it had been all he could do to grab a towel or a dry blanket before he it dragged him under again. This was different. It wasn't the sweating that had frozen him to his core, but the dream itself. Though the cold had filled his body, his mind bathed in earlier events. Even though he believed Hannibal didn't intend to eat him, at least not soon, Will's subconscious clearly hadn't gotten the memo. The nightmare seemed straightforward, but he knew that his mind was trying to tell him something else. Will shuddered as he felt the burning in his chest, the sensation his mind had conjured when the dream Hannibal licked his heart. Will couldn't help returning to the image. The Hannibal of his dream was no less monstrous than in reality, and yet the hands that had cradled Will's heart had been careful, almost reverent.

He knew why, of course he did, but it changed nothing. Maybe if he told himself that often enough, he could hang on to the tattered shreds of his sanity. The burning pulsed in his chest once more, then wandered lower. Will slammed his right fist into the floor, wrenching his shoulder in the sling and bringing blissfully bright pain to the front of his mind. The physical suffering was so much easier to endure.

Will stumbled to his feet and turned off the water, breathing harshly as he processed a flurry of thoughts and feelings. He processed them right into a box, locked it, and threw away the key. Maybe his mind was trying to tell him to let go of Abigail. Maybe that was the only way Will might ever see the outside of this room again, but he couldn't. He wouldn't. He owed it to her to be accountable for her death. If he was selfish in how he clung to her memory, it was only because she gave him the strength he needed to survive, or at least take Hannibal down with him. Anything else, if he relaxed his grip on avenging her... Maybe he could play along with what Hannibal wanted, but how easy would it be to let things slip too far, to lose himself to the creature Hannibal wanted him to become? To lose himself to the things he wanted and knew he shouldn't?

A bang struck his ears, magnified in volume by his vulnerability. The sound of the door to his prison closing. Will held his breath, frozen not from cold, but like prey. Silence followed, long enough that his body screamed for oxygen, and finally Will let himself exhale. Hannibal's sense of proprietary and etiquette seemed, so far, to mostly extend to his prisoners. Violence was always be a possibility, it sat beneath them in every interaction. A trapdoor that could open with one wrong move, but at least itrequired that trigger. So far.

Will nudged the shower door, already ajar, and peeked out. The angle wasn't ideal, but the small stack of towels told enough of a story. They weren't there before. Perhaps the door closing had been louder than usual, in fact, and not just to Will's jumpy heart. With the shower raining down on him, it would have been easy to miss the usual sound. He hadn't exactly been alert to his surroundings. Well, he was now.

On the one hand, Hannibal had been in the room and Will hadn't had a clue. On the other, he seemed to have left towels and gone. The mild relief to that effect was muted by the fact that there were already towels in the bathroom, ones that would have been sufficient if he wasn't also dealing with soaked clothing. With his head now clear, he took in where his pants had landed and fit it in with his blurry memory of stumbling into the shower. Thankfully, the shirt was large, but Will was done with the total lack of privacy. No matter where the cameras were, they and the lack of a door on the bathroom were bullshit. If Hannibal wanted him to co-operate, he could start there.

Will ducked out just enough to grab the towels that had already been there. He peeled off the sling, then carefully removed the shirt. On an impulse, he dropped the shirt on the floor of the shower, intentionally careless with it. He dried off as best he could with speed and wrapped the second towel around his hips. The wet towel went on the rack, and the sling next to it. Leaving the shirt on the floor was a little petty, but all it took was the jingle of the chain to remind him that petty was more than warranted. It also sent a message.

The bandages on his shoulder had also soaked through, and he pulled them off with ease. He left them in the sink. His shoulder looked pretty good from the front. The stitches might be ready to come out. The back would be worse, but without a mirror, he still couldn't see.

Will loathed the idea of putting the sweat-soaked pants back on, but he grabbed them, knowing they were better than staying in a towel. Fortunately, he wouldn't need to suffer with the old, too-tight pants. Hannibal left more than towels behind. He'd also stripped the bed. Will took a moment to be shocked by how long he'd been oblivious to his captor's presence before moving on. There was a new pair of pants waiting for him, along with several pairs of underwear. Boxer-briefs like he preferred (because Hannibal had planted evidence, but he'd also snooped around while feeding Will's dogs, naturally), but in a much higher quality fabric. The pants were loungers or pyjama, rather than sweats. The fabric was softer, lighter, but still sturdy. They were a dark grey, almost black, and the left leg had a zipper sewn up the side, its colour so similar it would blend in from a distance.

No shirts. The extra that had been there was gone. Frustrating, but Will reasoned that this was because Hannibal wanted to inspect and dress his wounds. It had been several days. A little insulting, perhaps, given Will was smart enough not to leave the back of his shoulder untended. Although, as the shirt in the shower and bandages in the sink would attest, Will wasn't beyond being petty if it was his only way to lash out. For now. He also had his demands ready this time, and he *was* prepared to be as stubborn and rude as needed to. Dangerous, but he had to find Hannibal's limits at some point. Better when Will's weakened state makes him less of a threat. The difference between life and death could lie in Hannibal's concept of etiquette. Rude to kick a man when he's down.

If attacking Hannibal physically was being encouraged, then Will would attack in every other way he could.

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Hannibal took just long enough to return that Will started pacing. The timing was more than suspicious, but not useful. He carried the expected shirts, sheets, his medical bag, and a single tupperware container. Will leaned back against the wall that was definitely a window, arms folded loosely over his chest. The gesture's protective nature felt like a show of weakness, but mostly he was supporting his wounded shoulder.

Hannibal glanced at Will briefly as he entered, then toed the door closed and turned to place his small pile of items on the nearly empty shelves. Will stayed where he was, waiting for Hannibal to adjust the placement 'just so.'

"Has your fever returned?" Hannibal asked when he was done.

"Probably just a nightmare."

"Best to be certain," Hannibal's gaze flicked briefly to the chairs, then the bed, before landing on Will once more. "What is it you require for your cooperation today?

"Not just gonna try a 'pretty please'?"

"Given the dreams you've experienced in the last months, this one must have been particularly unsettling to cause such distress," Hannibal observed without pause. Will ignored the inflection on the word 'distress.' Hannibal was concerned with Will's attitude, not any incidental suffering.

"Less the nightmare than the lack of privacy," Will put his strength behind the words of his opening gambit. "The cameras are well hidden -ish, but the bathroom door? That's just rude."

Hannibal straightened, just a fraction, and Will lowered his walls enough to try and get a better read on the man. As Hannibal approached, one deliberate step at a time, Will wondered if perhaps he'd made a mistake. For what was supposed to end up a blow in Will's favour, Hannibal was far too pleased. Like a cat that knocks things off the table just to get noticed, attention.

"The state of your health has made surveillance a necessity." Hannibal approached as he spoke. Will breathed in his confidence, his control. He stood tall as the other man neared, instinctively mirroring his posture.

"Was," Will countered. Though a part of him instinctively yearned to fight or flee from the predator before him, he ignored it. If he was going to survive this, even if it was just want Hannibal wanted, Will had to lean into his own predator. Or one of the many he had stored away. Right now, though, it was all about the one that held him captive.

Hannibal shifted a foot, now within arm's reach.

"Adjustments could be made," he offered clinically. "We should begin stretching and exercising your shoulder, to ensure you regain as much strength and mobility as possible. Your previous injury makes physical therapy all the more important."

A cruel retort balanced on Will's tongue. *That desperate to get your hands on me?* But Will didn't know what he would do if Hannibal agreed. Don't throw chum to a shark when you don't have a plan for what to do next. Will instantly felt uncomfortable in his skin, so much of which was currently on display.

Hannibal hovered at the edge of Will's physical space, focused and watching, always watching for the slightest tell. Taking a step back would be tantamount to surrender.

"I want the bathroom door back, and no cameras in there." He demanded. He'd gone over his demands enough times while waiting that they came out with little effort. "Don't leave me to *starve* again and my health will be just fine."

Hannibal's deliberately thoughtful expression was, Will decided, one of his lazier attempts. Probably because they both knew he would agree.

"Continue to cooperate with tending your wounds, as well as the physical therapy, and you may have privacy in the bathroom."

Bargaining for the right to piss in private. Will's standards had certainly fallen.

"The shoulder wound only," he amended. He wasn't that stupid.

There was the slightest twitch of Hannibal's lips, approval or amusement, perhaps. If you're going to make a deal with the devil, always read the fine print and check for loopholes.

"A fair stipulation," Hannibal conceded. "I accept."

"Agreed, then." Will couldn't help the roll of his eyes. It was such bullshit, and they both knew it. Rewards for good behaviour. Like a pet.

Eyes on the ceiling, he barely sawHannibal move. One powerful hand clamped onto Will's throat and shoved him the step back into the fake wall.Hannibal's expression hardly changed, only now he was so close that Will could feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek. Hannibal shifted his right foot forward, between Will's bare feet, solidifying his grip while also making it hard for Will to regain his footing, should he try.

"My tolerance for your rudeness does have its limits, William." Hannibal uttered the threat almost conversationally.

Will blinked up at his mahogany eyes and found them a brick wall. The threat didn't need additional menace. This was Lecter for a slap on the hand, at best. The hand around his throat was steady, strong, and sure. The grip was just tight enough that his survival instinct was setting off sirens, but there was no struggle to breathe.

Will let out half a chuckle. An aborted, exhausted thing.

"So does my tolerance for your bullshit." Will stared Hannibal in the eye. He countered Hannibal's careful mask with his righteous anger. The constellation of simmering, blood-soaked emotion that he couldn't even begin to accurately describe. It felt formidable as both a weapon and a shield. "You're not going to kill me. Not yet."

The grip around his throat tightened just enough to cause pain, and neither blinked.

“How lacking in imagination.” Hannibal’s tone shifted to disappointment, and *hunger* assaulted Will’s mind as the monster let a crack of his true self peek out. Hannibal crowded in closer, pining Will more firmly against the wall. He spoke softly into Will’s ear, breath sending chills down his spine. “I would greatly enjoy consuming you. There are cuts you would hardly miss.”

Will’s heart sank. It was an option he hadn’t even considered. Somehow his brain always connected being eaten with being dead. Funny that.

He was still fairly certain Hannibal wanted him intact, but with his surgical skills, he could take a person apart, one piece at a time. Drag it out over... Will’s brain latched onto the idea and graced him with visuals of it happening to him over months or even years. Reduced from man to just the pieces necessary for some twisted semblance of life. If not for the residual power of his fury, he would easily have gotten lost in a thousand worst-case scenarios.

“Limits,” Will swallowed awkwardly, and the warm grip around his throat was almost steadying in how the threat of further violence grounded him in the present. “Got it.”

Hannibal didn’t respond. Instead, he cocked his head to the side, leaning in and inhaling deeply near the crook of Will’s neck. Will felt a flush of blood rush to his chest and face. He swallowed again, hyper-aware of every place Hannibal’s body brushed against his own.

“Did you just smell *me?”*

“Hard not to.”

A part of Will wanted to ask just what was up with Hannibal’s scent kink, or whatever it was. Not at that exact moment, though. No, his brain was too overloaded to do more than freeze in place. The consequences probably weren’t worth it.

“Not the encephalitis,” Hannibal diagnosed as he leaned back. “Excellent.” He released his grip on Will’s neck, taking two steps back before he opened the room’s door. “Eat your breakfast. I’ll be back shortly.”

Hannibal scooped up his medical bag and left. When the door clicked shut, Will still hadn’t moved a single muscle.

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Will had little appetite, but he forced himself to swallow the fruit-filled oatmeal. Two proper meals had done him some good, but he had a lot of healing left to do if he wanted to stand a chance in a fight. Or have the stamina to run. Assuming the food kept coming, Will needed to rebuild, and he needed his arm back.

He considered putting on one of the shirts Hannibal left behind, but once he'd gotten past the animal fear, Will's stubbornness had roared back to life. Instead of giving Hannibal the chance to enjoy his embarrassment, Will cloaked himself in indifference. It wasn't hard to do, especially when he could reinforce his facade by mirroring Hannibal's own mask.

When he returned, Hannibal held the door open wide, and gestured at the smaller door he had leaned against the opposite wall. It was the most Will had yet seen of the hallway outside his room, but it told him very little. Hannibal ducked out of view momentarily, returning with the medical bag.

He glanced at the still-stripped bed, an aura of disappointment wafting off him with a raised eyebrow. Without a word, however, he picked up the sheets he had left and set about re-making the bed with exacting precision. It could have been an opportunity to attack, Will supposed, but to what end? Instead, he watched with what he hoped appeared to be idle curiosity. Hannibal's movements were smooth, precise, unhurried. When he finished his task, the bed perfectly made, he gestured towards the far end.

"Please," Hannibal said courteously.

Will stood from his place at the table and strolled as casually as he could manage to the bed. He sat silently and waited for Hannibal to get on with it. This seemed to suit Hannibal just fine. After a quick visual inspection, he produced a small pair of scissors, which he used to remove the stitches from the front of Will's shoulder. Will glanced at scissors, calculating the odds of getting his hands on them, how much damage they could do, and knew it wasn't worth the attempt.

"You're healing well," Hannibal explained as he removed the last stitches.

"Great," Will deadpanned, doing his best to look bored.

It was easier to conceal his emotions with his back turned. Hannibal pressed carefully around the recently re-opened wound there. He then dabbed at it with some sort of antiseptic before applying a fresh bandage. It stung, but aside from a brief clenching of his shoulder muscles, Will kept himself from reacting.

When Hannibal finished, Will turned side-on, glancing at Hannibal's to assess his mood. Damn near impossible, but at least Will wasn't picking up on any signs of impending violence. Hannibal returned his tools to the bag, then placed his hand on Will's shoulder and grabbed his wrist.

Straight to it then, Will thought as his arm and shoulder were stretched and manipulated, judging his range of motion. Hannibal pushed enough to hurt, but not seriously. No more than Will remembered from his brief visits to the physiotherapist after being stabbed.

The Dr. Lecter (former surgeon edition) persona was, at least on the surface, clinically indifferent. It made the physical contact less unsettling, at least. Hannibal could easily use this opportunity to be even more of an asshole than usual, and Will supposed he should be thankful for that. Instead, the lack of overtly horrible behaviour made it harder for Will hold

on to his anger. The embarrassment was threatening to win out, and Will had experienced enough of that for one day.

“So, was that when you knew?” Will asked, falsely casual.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Hannibal replied without hesitation or pause in his movements.

“When you *smelled* me.” Will couldn’t stop the emphasis, but it wasn’t as unsettled as he felt.

Will felt the brief pause in the movement of Hannibal’s hands along his arm, less than a second of hesitation, but it was there. He almost didn’t need to hear the answer.

“I knew you were ill, then, yes.” Hannibal confessed without remorse. “I suspected it was encephalitis when you first drew a clock for me.”

Hannibal had Will’s arm stretched at an awkward, somewhat painful angle. He held it there, possibly for therapeutic reasons, but more likely because the confirmation sent rage slashing and burning through Will’s entire being. Months. He’d known for months. It wasn’t surprising, but it was a confirmation of another massive betrayal. It took Will more than a moment to reign in his emotions. With his arm effectively pinning him in place, his urge to lash out was more easily suppressed. When Will relaxed, Hannibal shifted his grip as if nothing had happened.

“A fascinating indication of cognitive impairment. To you, the drawing appeared normal, when in fact the numbers followed only along the right side of the circle.” Hannibal continued his manipulations, both physical and mental. This time Will was prepared for the disturbing knowledge of the harm Hannibal did to him. He only let a brief clench of his muscles betray him, and after a few more therapeutic movements, Hannibal released his arm.

“I knew the clock thing was bullshit,” Will muttered as he shuffled through his memories. He looked down at his knees, at the too-nice prison pants. He wondered idly if Hannibal sewed the zipper in himself. “You didn’t just sit back and watch my brain catch fire. You made it worse.”

“Did I?”

Will snapped his head to the side to glare at the utter bastard he’d once thought of as a friend.

“I don’t know how, but *yes*.” He was certain of it. “You got Dr. Sutcliffe to forge my scan results, and then you silenced him. Georgia Madchen was following me, but she walked in on you. You killed her *just in case* her memory got any clearer. Or to...”

Hannibal stood. The door clicked open, but Will was no longer watching. The pendulum in his mind swung. Reality wiped clean as scenes painted in exquisite detail built behind his eyes. The knowledge didn’t change a damn thing, but he still needed to see it.

I slice into Sutcliffe's jaw. A nod to the work of Georgia Madchen, but in my Copycat persona I make the work more dramatic, elevate it without obviously evoking my style as the Ripper. Dr. Sutcliffe could have learned so much about such a rare condition. Instead, his concern for the patient, for ethics, hamstrung the man. Unworthy. Weak. The scent of rotting flesh invades the room. The girl's condition is interesting, and useful in this scenario. I stay silent, knowing my face will be blank to her. My intent was to frame Will for this, but I don't have time to kill her, too. I hand her the knife, which she takes in a daze. If she lives long enough to heal, I will silence her next.

Lights flash before his eyes, blinding strobes like in his dream. Will lands back in his own mind, in his own memory.

" Please don't lie to me!"

The words are desperate, panicked, terrified. Will didn't remember ever saying them, but the emotions were all too real, vivid. He didn't realize he said the words out loud until Hannibal's voice, his touch, brought Will back to reality.

"Will," Hannibal was crouched before him. Will could see his curiosity dripping dark ichor out of every pore. "What are you seeing?"

The man that is supposed to be his paddle, his guide, insists that Will arrived alone. Hannibal wouldn't lie about something this important, would he? They're not just doctor and patient. They're friends. Growing closer by the week in a pattern of escalation that didn't equate to Hannibal being anything but honest in this moment.

Will fragments. He doesn't know what is real anymore.

The world around him doesn't exactly swing. It undulates, like those rare occasions where you can see heat radiating off a surface. His balance is mostly intact, but there's no detail, or maybe there's too much. Either way, he's contained, trapped, desperate as his worst fears are being realized. He can't tell what is real.

He's not sure he still knows who he is.

Will's hands trembled with the uncovered memory, his body both reliving it and incapable of translating the signals. So sick, so confused, and the panic of the past corrupted his present. He felt his control slipping. His lungs refused to function like they should.

“Will, breathe.” Hannibal told him in the present. Maybe. It was too easy to empathize with himself, even through a memory lost until now.

Hands touched the sides of his face, felt his forehead, and it’s the memory – no, the now – both?

“Will, can you hear me?”

Garret Jacob Hobbs is the only defined point in the room. Everything else wavers and shimmers. Afterimages hang in the air. Hobbs is solid. He flickers occasionally, static and flies and light, but Hobbs always re-solidifies in moments. The part of his brain that isn’t boiling alive points out helpfully that this means he isn’t real.

Hannibal is right.

“ NO!”

Will shoved at Hannibal’s shoulders, but the pain in his own sent startled shockwaves through his nerves, and he couldn’t breathe.

“No, no, no,” he groaned between gasps for air. “Liar! I know-” He wheezed, trembling, his vision splotching with flashes of black and white. “I know!”

Will’s world turned inward, lungs screaming, limbs trembling, sparks of light and encroaching darkness. The searing certainty that he was dying, that his brain was melting inside his skull, flooded him with terror. Then there was warmth behind him. Powerful arms wrapped Will’s own to his chest. Firm, but not constricting. The minuscule part of Will that hadn’t lost its moorings told him that this was Hannibal Lecter, the enemy. The rest of Will was too far gone to listen.

“Breathe with me, Will.” Hannibal’s voice, deep and soothing, flowed into his ear. “Feel my chest moving, listen to the air flowing.” Hannibal exhaled near his ear, slipping by with both sound and the whisper of a touch. A long slow inhalation, the chest behind him filled with air. The warmth was soothing, and the rhythm lured him in. Desperate for that paddle, a lifeline, Will did as he was told. It took time to slow his frantic gasping, to ease into the shaky, deep breaths, but with Hannibal as a guide it was possible.

When Will’s shaking calmed, Hannibal released the hold on his arms. He kept his left arm around Will’s waist, palm against his bare chest, feeling him breathe. It was warm,

grounding. Hannibal's other hand brushed through Will's hair. It should have made his skin crawl, instead the touch was soothing. Hannibal was a metronome of calm solidity. As the world righted itself, Will felt the combination of mortification and blind rage lurking just beneath the surface.

"Breathe, relax. The worst is over." Hannibal continued to murmur reassurance.

Part of Will fought it. The memory that brought this on was the perfect example of why it was all a lie. It was too kind. Will knew it was an act. The calm energy and gentle touches served a purpose. They weren't anything more than a tool in Hannibal's belt. Another mask to wear. Knowing all this, Will should have shoved him away, confronted him with the truth. Instead, he sagged in the killer's grasp. Exhaustion engulfed him, and he didn't think he could have moved even if the hand against his chest dug in and pulled out his guts. Alarm bells were ringing, but the pull of sleep amid the illusion of safety was undeniable. Will's eyes finally fluttered closed, and he collapsed into sleep in Hannibal Lecter's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all liked this one. It was a lot of fun to write. It only took so long cause I spent a week dealing with food poisoning. (Blargh!)

I'm struggling with the next part, mostly because I'm trying to get Hannibal right (as per usual). It was delaying this part coming out until re-writes meant I could end on this lovely scene. Heh.

Anyway, thank you all so much for the kind words. They mean so much and keep me going!

You can also find me on tumblr at jaded-quill. I don't bite! (Without consent.) 💜

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Will's mind is waking up, finding the missing pieces, but exhaustion leads to mistakes.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, and the short chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emerging from sleep for the second time that day was entirely different from the first. Will was warm, comfortable, and had no dreams that he could remember. He was so content with the fuzzy glow that his conscious mind lagged. Staying in the drift of half-sleep was soothing. Nothing hurt, physically or otherwise. His body was more of a concept, whole and relaxed, rather than the weakened and wounded thing he'd become. Inevitably, the fog had to lift. His mind was already sending out trills of warning, reminding him of stark reality in fragments of remembrance. Will fought it, tried to sink back into the depths, but fighting only woke him faster.

Memory rose up with him, both recovered and recent. The arms he'd fallen asleep in were gone, replaced by a blanket perfectly draped over him, and a pillow under his head. Though warm and comfortable, a traitorous part of his mind missed the steadying presence wrapped around him. The recollection also worked to inspire his guts to eject his breakfast. Such a perfect contradiction to underline his experience of Hannibal Lecter: support and shameful horror, all at once.

Will propped himself up on an elbow, just enough to glance around the room. No sign of the man in question. Will exhaled in dubious relief and slid back onto into bed. Doubtless, the reprieve would not last long. Still, Will just didn't have the physical energy to get up yet. Mentally, though, his mind was already taking off and was not likely to stop.

The overwhelming weight of the terror embedded in his memory was lighter now, though not gone. Will could now look at it from the outside, compartmentalize, pick it apart, and analyze. What he uncovered before he'd collapsed told him something exceptionally important. Will already knew Hannibal had lied about his health, fucked with his head with the help of his fevers, but now he had a witness. A *living* witness.

He could place the memory in time now. If Hobbs hadn't been entirely in Will's head, then he had to be Abel Gideon. He'd sat at Hannibal's table, a silent observer, while Will came

undone. How much had Gideon seen? Did he escape, or did Hannibal let him go? Did he... Will's brain made the connection in a snap that shifted dark thoughts into a partial reconstruction.

I speak with Dr. Abel Gideon, the man who dared to claim my name. This confused pretender isn't entirely at fault. Chilton scrambled his brain. Unfortunately for Gideon, he serves me better dead. I haven't prepared for his arrival, and killing him would likely involve a struggle. A mess in my home, evidence, would be hard to avoid. Fortunately, I know exactly what to do. I provide Dr. Gideon with Alana Bloom's address, then let him leave. He knows too much, but he won't survive to tell the tale. Even if he lives, he knows what The Chesapeake Ripper is capable of. He is intelligent enough to understand the importance of silence.

Granted, Will couldn't say with any certainty if Abel Gideon now knew Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper. Still, it felt right. It fit. There must be better proof in his head, somewhere. Still buried where he can't see it. Will put it aside for the moment and moved on.

I tell Will that he's had a seizure. It's true, after all. Then I lay the bait with concern for Alana. Gideon is still out there, after all. I exit the room and leave Will's firearm within reach. Gideon has a head start, but even as weak and disoriented as his illness makes him, Will is desperate. Gideon is unarmed, Alana's home under FBI protection. I am confident in Will to emerge triumphant. It would be better if he wasn't near to collapsing, but the results will still be worth the risk.

Will remembered snow, cold, and Garrett Jacob Hobbs standing outside Alana's home. Still blurred by the fever, but real. He was told after that the man he shot was Gideon. Still alive, and evidently not talking, yet. How much of Hannibal's true nature had he seen?

How did any of this serve Hannibal's concept of transformation? Pushing Will to kill made sense now, but that night in particular, permanent damage could have been done. There would be no one to transform if he'd died. Unless being strong enough to survive was the point. As a Doctor, Lecter should know that dumb luck and bad timing can kill anyone. As a monster? There was still too much Will didn't understand. Maybe part of him wanted Will to fail, to die. Maybe Will really was Hannibal Lecter's biggest mistake.

Just because Will understood him better than anyone else didn't mean he could see into all the nooks and crannies of Hannibal's labyrinthine mind.

He sat up with a sigh and grabbed one of the clean shirts. At least he would be dressed when his captor returned. Buttoning the shirt felt like donning armour. It was flimsy in a literal sense, but having it on steadied him. He added the sling reluctantly. His shoulder was sore from being stretched, but the biting pain had lessened from when he arrived. Will wondered

if he could use it to his advantage. Would Hannibal be able to tell when his arm healed enough to go without? Could he fake more pain than he was in? Enough to fool the former surgeon? It might be possible. If he could conjure up how it felt before, maybe it would be enough.

The sound of the door cut his musings short.

“Welcome back,” Hannibal greeted with his usual gentlemanly grace, seasoned with a hint of amusement. The kind that implied he was referring to more than the obvious. The sort of thing most people would never pick up on.

If Will was smarter, he would have let it pass.

“From sleep, or from our past?”

Hannibal’s smile grew by a fraction.

“Both are accurate, I imagine.” As if he didn’t know. Then again, Will had said little to him about the memory. Maybe he could obfuscate the extent of his recollection.

Will folded his good arm against the bad, looking off to the side. Right into the bathroom.

“How about our deal? Was that accurate?” Hannibal was probably eager to know everything Will had uncovered, and there was no way he was getting even a hint without first following through on their privacy deal.

Hannibal was silent for a moment, eyes roving over Will with apparent clinical detachment. Whatever he was looking for, it evidently wasn’t worth commenting on.

“Please, take a seat on the bed, feet on the floor.” Hannibal gestured to a spot in the middle of its length.

Will considered questioning the request, but he could tell that it was a prerequisite for getting the bathroom door installed. So, attempting to appear bored with the proceedings, Will complied.

Hannibal nodded, then turned and walked out of view. In the quiet, Will heard the faintest clicking sound from behind and beneath the bed. Curious, he attempted to move his shackled ankle forward, only to discover the chain refused to give any slack. Locked in place, then, good to know. Also good to know that Hannibal respected the threat he posed, even when injured. Will’s plan to exaggerate that injury already felt like a good one. He let his shoulders sag a fraction, letting his brows pinch in an easy facsimile of pain.

When Hannibal returned he had a drill in hand, and Will quietly wondered that the sight of such a dangerous sadist with power tools hardly fazed him. It also explained the caution. Power tools wouldn’t require nearly as much strength for Will to wield as a deadly weapon. Hannibal positioned a thin but solid door, then efficiently screwed in the hinges. He checked to be sure the door opened and closed smoothly, then shut it once more. He also inspected the freshly sanded gap at the bottom that would allow the chain to pass under. It was more than

Will was expecting, to be honest. There was clearly no lock on the thing, but that was also fine. Well, expected.

Hannibal swept out with the drill, and though Will wanted him to stay gone for the day, he knew that was absurdly wishful thinking. Hannibal probably couldn't wait to dissect Will's meltdown. He returned with a tray of food, and Will found that his chain once more allowed him to move.

"The cameras?" Will reminded him.

"I would never place one in the bathroom," Hannibal replied as if the idea offended him. "One in this room saw enough to ensure your safety."

Great. That wasn't creepy at all, but Will mostly believed. Shame he wouldn't be able to see how they were concealed.

"Now, you may not feel like it, but I need you to eat for me."

Oh, and Will couldn't help the furious glare he levelled at Hannibal. The wording was a little awkward, but only because it was nearly the exact thing he'd said following Will's seizure in his dining room. A deliberate attempt to provoke. To burrow at how much Will remembered.

It was tempting to tell Hannibal just where to shove his food, but that wouldn't help his situation. He didn't feel hungry, but he knew enough about panic attacks and emotional turmoil to understand that his body needed sustenance, and it was only the lingering effects that turned his stomach. When fleeing a predator, the body shut down or slowed several systems in order to fuel the muscles. Digestion shut down immediately, but afterwards the energy used, whether a person physically ran from a predator or not, needed to be replenished. So Will stood carefully and joined Hannibal at the table. His exhaustion didn't need to be feigned.

Will didn't pay attention to the meal. Pasta of some sort, with ground meat that could be anything. He couldn't bring himself to worry about what or who it might be. He knew Hannibal would let him starve if he refused, so Will pulled back. Like sleeping while sitting up or disassociating. Like living with an untreated brain fever, without the hallucinations. That he wasn't afraid of being attacked while he ate would be funny if he could muster the energy for amusement. He'd used what little strength he had making sure Hannibal kept up his end of their deal. Pathetic how little he had. Even though he knew he still hadn't recovered from his injury, or the days without food, let alone the panic attack, it was still aggravating.

"Don't forget to drink your water. You need to hydrate."

Will blinked up at Hannibal, consciously realizing just how out of it he'd become. Was the food drugged? No. Hannibal wouldn't do that to his food. Probably. Unless he deemed it necessary. Will picked up his tall glass and tipped back the water, chugging the whole thing in one go before not quite slamming it back on the table. Hannibal's distaste with the move, though subtle as always, was apparent. Will considered Hannibal's silence on the matter a minor victory.

“Are we done here?” There was still food on Will’s plate, but he’d eaten most of it. His stomach churned at the idea of consuming more. Almost literally.

“You do look unsteady,” Hannibal allowed after a moment. He stood, and Will took that as his cue to rise to his feet. Too quickly, it seemed, as his vision blurred and he stumbled. A curse fell from his lips as his feet tangled in the chain, tipping him over sideways. He resigned himself to a hard impact with the floor just as Hannibal swooped in and caught him. Will froze, then hastily slipped his right foot free of the mess. Hannibal tipped him back upright, seizing the opportunity to place a hand on his forehead, checking for fever.

“’m fine,” Will mumbled in discomfort, before finally slipping out of Hannibal’s grip. He scooted under his outstretched arm and carefully hurried back to the bed. He knew he only got away because Hannibal let him, but that fact was unimportant for now. Lying down was a pressing need.

For nearly half a minute, there was silence in the room. Will, curled up on the bed with his back to the door, assumed he’d missed the sound of Hannibal leaving. He was wrong. Weight joined him on the bed, Hannibal sitting near the head.

“Partially recovered memories can fester, corrupting the mind like an infection, if not properly examined and processed.”

Will groaned into the pillow.

“They can be deceptive,” Hannibal added, undeterred. “Blending with other recollections, even unrelated thoughts and influences.”

He knew that silence was safest, knew it down to his core. Yet, the fresh wave of anger, indignation, *betrayal* consumed Will. He twisted around, levelling his most disgusted glare at the man now looming over him.

“I don’t need your help, Dr. Lecter.” He bit out, fresh adrenaline surging and clearing his mind only enough to vent. *Not smart, Graham.* He pulled himself upright, trying to level the playing field despite his exhaustion. “Letting you into my head is the single biggest mistake I have ever made. I would have to be as crazy as you tried to make me feel to even consider trusting you anywhere near my mind again.”

A twitch, almost imperceptible, of Hannibal’s eye, and Will knew he’d hit on something that irked the otherwise unflappable bastard. He should have stopped there. Taken the win.

“Drop the act. It’s insulting to us both. You don’t care about my mental health,” he laughed, a sharp bark that verged on hysteria, but Will barely reined it in. “Except to destroy it. You’re just trying to satisfying your curiosity. Even when I *begged you* to tell me the truth. When I *trusted* you. You let my brain boil and told me there was *no one there.*” Tears betrayed Will, trembling their way down his cheeks. He snarled, a sound born from anger, frustration and soul-deep devastation, as he attempted to wipe the evidence from his cheeks. An aching sense of despair and exhaustion, companions to the rest, marauded through his frame. His body shook with it. If he’d had the strength, he would have gone for Hannibal’s throat; with his teeth if he had to. Instead, he could barely stay upright, forced to steady himself with his

good arm. Hannibal sat right there, his face so fucking close, an impassive, unfeeling mask. What was even the point?

Will took in a deep breath, opened his mouth to tell the faded illusion of his friend to fuck right off, only to feel a powerful hand, long and steady fingers, grip his jaw from beneath. Will froze, though still trembling, his sense of self preservation finally kicking back in. Self preservation, and something shoved deep down under all the pain. Something nearly crushed to death under all the rest, and yet still, inexplicably, alive.

“I admit to curiosity,” Hannibal spoke with a conspiratorial air. “I told you, Will. You are unique.”

“Fuck you,” Will bit back. After the threats from earlier, he should have kept his damn mouth shut, but his filter had entirely dissolved. Will raised his left hand to grab at Hannibal’s wrist, yank it away, but Hannibal caught him with his free hand, his grip unbreakable on Will’s forearm. 2 working arms to one, Will couldn’t win this fight. They both knew it. Making the attempt hadn’t been rational, he could admit that.

Hannibal hummed softly, as if in thought.

“I have an errand to run tomorrow, and may not return until the following day. I will provide meals before I go, and suggest you eat them.” It was obvious this wasn’t actually a suggestion. “You’re going to need all of your strength when I return.”

Will swallowed a whimper, burying it deep down. His mind spun, conjuring the possibilities. Most involved losing an organ or body part and then being forced to eat it. Why couldn’t he just have kept his mouth shut? He closed his eyes tight, despair oozing up from the grip on his jaw and slithering down his throat.

Hannibal’s grip shifted as he brushed a thumb across Will’s cheek, spilling the fresh tears that pooled in his eye. Will’s eyes snapped back open as Hannibal released his hold, bringing the tear-wet thumb to his mouth for an indulgent taste. Recklessly stupid or not, Will reached down to the chain connected to his ankle, picturing exactly how he could wrap the sturdy links around Hannibal’s neck. Pull them tight until he choked on Will’s tears.

Perhaps it was fortunate that Hannibal stood before Will could do more than find the chain in his left hand. That scenario wouldn’t go Will’s way. Not today.

“I will see you soar, Will. Whether your wings melt is entirely up to you.” Lecter slipped out the door, not waiting for a response.

Next time he made the mistake of getting that close, Will resolved to rip his throat out. Or at the very least, take out a chunk that would be exceptionally hard to explain next time Jack came calling. He collapsed into the bed, still lightly trembling and leaking exhausted tears. The idea of leaving his mark on that flesh, proof to anyone with sense that Dr. Hannibal Lecter was not what he seemed, felt immensely satisfying. Even if it was the last thing he ever did, that scar would be with Hannibal for the rest of his cursed life.

Chapter End Notes

Hope the characterization works. I struggled with it at the end here. I will, however, defend Will crying to the end. He sheds a few on the show and this is absolutely the sort of low point that would bring tears out. A nadir, if you will, from which things can only get more interesting.

Comments mean the world to me. 💜

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Tension grows as conflict and bloodshed become inevitable.

Chapter Notes

Note the graphic violence warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will woke at roughly noon, based on the sliver of sky above him. He would have said it was a miracle he could sleep at all, but he'd been so exhausted that he passed out almost immediately after Hannibal left. He knew there had been dreams, but felt lucky for how quickly they slipped from his memory. His mouth was dry, his limbs stiff. He'd slept a long time. Well, he needed it.

Knowing that Hannibal was gone, and with the ostensible privacy of the new door, Will indulged in a hot shower. It was the first time he'd felt even close to safe enough to actually enjoy the ritual, to linger instead of rushing through it. He kept darting his gaze to the door, looking for the slightest hint of a shadow, but otherwise relaxed into the hot spray as it massaged his tense muscles, and cleaned himself as thoroughly as he could manage. If things were about to get bloody, at least he'd have this one day of feeling moderately human.

While the hot water did its work, Will gave his arm and shoulder a proper test of strength and flexibility. Slow, careful movements only provoked mild pain in most directions. He could get away with a lot in the short term if he avoided a few angles. Enough to make an unexpected move or two with his right, before the pain became a real problem. In terms of strength, his intact muscles hadn't deteriorated too drastically, but the damage to his shoulder meant that lifting even a bottle of shampoo was problematic. There was more internal healing to be done, and attempting to lift things not only hurt, but sometimes caused twinges that ricocheted down his arm. These spasms invariably caused him to fumble or drop whatever he tried to hold.

Unless he got his hands on something light and sharp, he couldn't do much with his wounded arm. Even then, a spasm at the wrong time and it could drop from his grip. Frustrating, but not a surprise.

After, as Will ate his annoyingly delicious breakfast, he meticulously assembled all the knowledge he'd acquired. His mind was sharper than it had been in far too long, so he put it

to use. He scoured his memory for everything he'd observed about Dr. Hannibal Lecter. He summoned memories of their every interaction together, using his newfound perspective to evaluate it all again. When he finished, the conclusions he drew didn't shock him like they once might have, but they still sat uneasily in his gut.

Patterns emerged, stark in the light of day. Things he should have seen, things he couldn't have known, and realities that he'd wilfully hidden from himself. Though Will had already worked out that Hannibal wanted him to kill again to satisfy his curiosity and concept of metamorphosis, Will could now see how his dark urges had been supported, nurtured, as Hannibal nudged and directed him into acting on them. All woven together with genuine support, as he simultaneously undermined the rest of Will's fragile support structure.

The worst part of it all, however, wasn't working out when and how Hannibal got away with everything he did, or how he pulled those blinders so carefully over Will's eyes. Oh no. It wasn't discovering new meals and who must have been in them, or realizing that Hannibal probably fed people to his dogs too, because he absolutely would. No, the worst was realizing *why* Will had been blind for so long. Even though he already knew the answer, to an extent, before that day, he still spent hours visualizing the pattern, spreading it out before him, twisting every moment and fact around in his head as if the puzzle could somehow reveal a different image.

The truth was that Will hadn't just trusted Hannibal. It wasn't a professional relationship that Hannibal had manipulated into feeling like friendship. No, Will had genuinely enjoyed Hannibal's company. Really enjoyed it. More than was safe to admit. Worse, given the circumstances, was that despite inflicting what amounted to both physical and psychological torture, Hannibal cared about Will too. Not in a way that a normal person would, or could even understand. Understanding psychopaths was Will's specialty, and he still struggled with the concept. Not that Hannibal was a typical psychopath. No, he was as exceptional in this respect as all others. Still, to whatever depth the man was capable, Hannibal genuinely considered Will a friend. When he took Will from the hospital on an admitted impulse, it was out of regret. Not in what he'd done, any of it, but because Will would be out of his reach. Maybe 'pet' would be a more apt description than 'friend' or anything else. Still, for a man that considered most humans be pigs, pet might be the closest Hannibal could get to real friendship.

Pet felt more accurate than science experiment, victim, friend or family. People love their pets. If they're capable of love.

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"Mr. Graham?"

Will blinked in surprise. He had thought, maybe wished, his hallucinations had ended with the starvation. Maybe the memory being unearthed, the stress of the previous day, had jarred something loose.

“Abigail?” He couldn’t think what else to say. Surprise mixed with fear, but her voice was still a comfort.

“Maybe it’s time to let me go.” She didn’t sound convinced by her own words.

“No.” His reply was resolute, absolute.

“But-”

“I can’t do that to you. ...or to me.” Will sighed, head hanging down. “If you’re a product of my trauma and imagination, then you know why.”

There was a long pause. Long enough that Will thought she might be gone again, and he wasn’t sure if that was a relief or a tragedy.

“I’m not what you think I am.” This time her voice was so soft, he almost missed it. “I never was.”

“You’re a survivor. You did what you had to do.” Will sighed, rubbing at his temples to soothe the light ache growing there. “I understand. I always understand, eventually.”

“If you don’t blame me, then you shouldn’t blame yourself.”

Will could see the fire in her eyes, that stubborn flame she kept so carefully under wraps. That defiant edge that came with her capacity to do what she had to.

“I’m not a helpless child.” Will retorted, a little angry at his subconscious. “No one is better equipped to survive him. I just can’t... I can’t be what he wants.”

“Because of me?” Abigail’s fire dimmed a little. Still strong, but now controlled. “It’s too late for me.”

“Not... not just because of you.” Will swallowed, a truth circling up from the depths that he didn’t want to face. If he didn’t, though, if he wilfully ignored the danger, it would drag him under and he knew it. “If I let you go, I lose the reminder of who I really am.” *Or more accurately*, he realized he couldn’t even admit to a hallucination, *who I need to be.*

“You’d rather die?”

Will almost laughed at that. It too closely echoed his thoughts before Hannibal reminded him that death might be a mercy.

“Is what he wants really so bad?” Abigail added.

“Yes,” Will replied quickly, then hesitated. “It goes against everything I’ve tried to be. Even if... even if he’s right. The darkness has always been there, but I made the choice. I used it to

stop killers, not become one. I just...” He balled his hands into fists, nails biting into his palms. “It was easy not to care how it isolated me. I was content. I was saving lives. I just... I never expected...” He shook his head, trying to displace the temptation, the heartache. “Crossing that line, willingly? I can’t. If I do, I’m not sure I’ll ever be *me* again. I won’t want to be...

“It’s not fair to you, I guess.” Though Will couldn’t feel much guilt over putting pressure on a hallucination, “but your death reminds me why the pain of doing the right thing is worth it. If I had saved you from him...”

“If you killed him,” Abigail interrupted. “You could be whatever you wanted.”

“If I killed him, he’d still win.” Will looked at his hands, pictured flesh, and tasted blood on his tongue. *It would bring me such pleasure that even without his influence, I don’t know if I could ever turn back.* But he can’t admit that out loud. Not to Abigail. Even if she already knew it. Even if she wanted him to.

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The lights turned on, jarring Will awake. The mercy of his current level of anxiety was in how too many thoughts made for shallow sleep, if any. His subconscious hadn’t been able to make it worse with nightmares, and his resolve remained firm. The anxiety was simply an extra helping of Fuck You from his brain. It would pass once Hannibal arrived. Just because Will’s thoughts were stuck in the possibilities of the immediate future, it didn’t mean that, fed and somewhat pulled back together, he wouldn’t be able to compartmentalize. He used to be fantastic at that. Will’s forts had eroded or been outright demolished, but he could rebuild.

Hannibal, when he returned, wasn’t in his usual suit and tie. Instead, he wore slacks and a button-down shirt, his sleeves rolled neatly up to the elbow. Will felt an echo of those arms wrapped around him with comforting strength, then shoved that memory aside in favour of the present. It didn’t help. The casual look suited the man. A fact Will already knew.

“I’d like to show you something,” Hannibal said in greeting. He lingered in the doorway with a touch of uncharacteristic hesitation. “It requires moving to a different room.”

Will raised an eyebrow as he stood from his perch on the edge of the bed, wishing he’d gotten more rest.

“If you decide to co-operate, you need only tolerate a blindfold for a few minutes.”

Not ideal, but the chance to get an idea of his surroundings? The layout of the place? He briefly pondered challenging the necessity of the blindfold, but its purpose was so obvious that the question would be insulting.

“And if I refuse?” Will asked when he realized Hannibal was waiting for a response.

Hannibal offered an elegant shrug, as if what he was about to say was also obvious.

“Drugs and unconsciousness, regrettably.”

“Not much of a choice, then.”

Much as Will hated the idea of giving up his sight in Hannibal’s presence, adding another layer of vulnerability and helplessness, being drugged was far worse on all accounts.

“Fine,” he capitulated.

At least Hannibal had the grace not to look smug. He produced a length of black cloth from a back pocket and gestured for Will to turn around. Turning his back on the killer took a firm grip on Will’s resolve, even though he didn’t rationally fear for his safety in that moment. When they got to this other room, that was when the real danger began. It helped Will, as his vision blacked out entirely, to know that he probably wasn’t about to lose a kidney. At least, it wasn’t a guaranteed outcome. Hannibal wouldn’t bother with this twisted trust exercise if he had already resolved to carve Will to pieces. Probably. Even as Will felt like he was getting a grip on the man’s mind, Hannibal still defied expectations.

The blindfold was simple fabric, but wide, and not a sliver of light made its way through. Will felt a brief pressure against his ankle, and for the first time since he arrived, his ankle was free of the shackle. If he found an opening, this journey would be the best shot he had for escape. Best didn’t mean good, however. Blind and with Hannibal alert to the possibility of an escape attempt, Will would only end up bleeding at best. Walking without the weight on his ankle was strange. It should feel like a return to normal, but he’d grown used to the light weight and found his steps slightly awkward as he readjusted.

Hannibal guided Will’s movements with a hand on the small of his back, like a dancer leading their partner. There was an odd sort of reassurance in it, even as danger sang with every step. Carpeted floor quickly gave way to cool tile or polished wood under bare feet. Will listened for the slightest sound, but found the only change was in the crash of the waves that grew more pronounced as they moved. It was gratifying to have his theory proved right, but knowing they were on the coast only drove home their current isolation. There might be neighbours, people not far, but they definitely weren’t on a beach. No, they were on a more isolated part of the coast. Far from prying eyes. The crashing suggested rocks rather than sand.

When they reached stairs downwards, Hannibal shifted his hand across Will’s back to his waist as he gripped his left upper arm firmly. The move was intended to steady Will in case he slipped, probably, but their proximity shrank to the type of hold that usually spoke of care, intimacy, and Will desperately restrained a shudder. Hannibal’s briefest pause told Will he’d failed to hide his reaction, but they continued without comment. Hannibal only spoke to offer additional direction.

Will felt his guts knotting. He tried to focus on placing his feet as he navigated blind down the stairs, but he could never stay out of Hannibal’s head for long. What had he read in Will’s

reaction? Will wasn't sure he even knew what it had been. Revulsion was the simple answer, but was it the correct one, or at least not the only one? For most of his life, Will had avoided human touch. Mostly because he'd avoided people, or scared them away. His pack had been a preferable substitute. He would have let Alana, but mostly... Both psychiatrists would probably call him touch starved.

Well, if Hannibal drew any unfortunate conclusions from it, Will would take his weakness and turn it into a weapon. That was his only valid option, and maybe-

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Hannibal shifted back to his previous position, their only point of contact the small of Will's back. Will let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Nearly there," Hannibal assured him.

Will pictured their route in his mind. A fairly simple one, but he supposed the blindfold was more about hiding exits, potential weapons, and anything else Hannibal wished to conceal. When they arrived at their destination, Will suspected they were nearly underneath his own prison.

Hannibal shifted, opening a door, and a rush of fresh scents and sounds swarmed them. Will froze, resisting the guiding push forward as the new data coalesced. It smelled like a hospital. Cleaners, sterility, a hint of the iron tang of blood, and the hum of medical equipment. Fuck, he'd been wrong.

He immediately shifted, bringing his elbow up towards where Hannibal's throat should be, and adjusted his weight towards his right foot, allowing him to hook his left behind Hannibal's knee. Naturally, Hannibal anticipated the move. Will's elbow hit nothing but air, and the hand on his back shoved firmly, using Will's shift in stance and momentum against him. Will stumbled forward, barely keeping on his feet. He ripped the blindfold off, whirling to defend himself, only to find Hannibal calmly shutting them in, entirely unbothered. Will took the brief reprieve to scan the room for weapons. He spotted a tray with surgical tools, including a scalpel, but his lunge toward the blade came to a halt when his brain processed the room's most prominent feature. Someone else had been prepped for surgery. Will wasn't the one going under the knife. There was a man strapped to the table, a black bag over his head and a white sheet draped over him. Only the clenched fists, peeking out past the restraints, thick and dusted with hair, gave away the victim's likely gender.

Will blinked at him, frantically adjusting to this new reality. He wasn't the one getting cut into today, but that didn't mean he was in any less danger. Hannibal approached, getting close without Will properly registering the movement.

"I brought you a gift," he purred in Will's ear. "Though I admit, this one will satisfy me as well."

Will's mind immediately jumped to Jack, but the man on the table was pale, smaller. Stocky enough to not be Price or Zeller, so no one from the FBI. Who else could it- Fuck. Will's eyes fluttered shut as the answer came to him. That tiny flicker of hope he'd gained through the recovered memory died, fading into the dark.

“Gideon,” he breathed. Will pulled himself back together with all the strength he possessed. If he played this just right, maybe this was his chance. “Pretty selfish gift,” he added as he straightened.

“He *was* going to kill Dr. Bloom,” Hannibal reminded him as he moved around the table, towards Gideon’s head. “He’s known enough of the truth to point the FBI toward me. Saw you have a mild seizure in my home.” Muffled grumblings came from under the hood. Hannibal strode the rest of the distance to the far end of the table and pulled it off. Gideon’s expression was closer to annoyance than terror as he tried to speak through a layer of tape. “You’ll get your chance to speak, Dr. Gideon. Don’t you worry.” Hannibal pat his cheek with mock affection before continuing to circle.

“Doesn’t mean I want to kill him,” Will protested while adjusting the lay of his sling. Taking a swing at Hannibal had left the bit on his shoulder folded awkwardly, and the adjustments were getting habitual.

There was no point in pretending he didn’t know Hannibal wanted him to take another life.

“A bit of a stretch, perhaps,” Hannibal agreed, to Will’s surprise. “You misunderstand the nature of this gift.”

Hannibal moved in closer. His loose, almost lazy movements belied how quickly he could strike if he chose. Will tilted his head, raising an eyebrow, pulling together all the calm and resolve he could muster.

“Dr. Gideon dared to claim my work as his own. For that, he has earned a slow and painful death. A *special* place at my table.” Hannibal’s intent bloomed in Will’s mind. The pieces falling into place with stark clarity.

“A preview of what’s in store if I don’t bend to your whims?” He let a sneer crawl across his face. Despite Hannibal’s threats regarding Will’s attitude, there was no way he didn’t appreciate being challenged, at least a little. This was just another one of his games.

“You may not wish him dead, but if he means nothing to you then ending his life is simple,” Hannibal moved to circle around the table again. “If you don’t see it as righteous vengeance, then perhaps a mercy killing? Dr. Gideon would appreciate a swift death over being pulled apart over weeks, and dining on his own flesh. Isn’t that right, doctor?” Hannibal ripped the tape from Gideon’s mouth, finally allowing him to speak. Gideon wet his lips, working his mouth back into a useful state. He remained, on the surface, unnaturally calm.

“Seems a bit of a double standard, Dr. Lecter. I didn’t choose to take your mantle, and then you just hand it to Mr. Graham?”

Will couldn’t help it. A dry laugh escaped his throat.

“He’s got a point. Chilton messed with his head,” Will agreed.

“You never believed yourself the copycat,” Hannibal countered. “Abel here *liked* the idea of being the Ripper, didn’t you?”

“I suppose it was more prestigious than my actual crimes,” Abel admitted. “Though I stand by my previous statement.”

“I compliment you on your fortitude in this moment, Doctor, but it’s not me you need to persuade,” Hannibal chided pleasantly. “We cannot turn back time, much as we might wish to. You are here, and the degree of your suffering is entirely in Will’s hands.”

Will scoffed, looking away from the men, cataloguing the rest of the room’s contents.

“You think killing him will give me the craving for more?” Will asked with derision. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Hannibal appeared unconcerned.

“When you killed Hobbes you felt righteous, powerful. This would not satisfy those urges.”

“Why bother, then?”

Hannibal only tilted his head forward, expectant.

“Wind me up and watch me go.” Will echoed his own words with a sigh. Not everything was about Will’s supposed metamorphosis. Hannibal’s curiosity must be indulged. If he had deeper layers of purpose, he certainly wouldn’t let those show.

“If you want me to indulge my bloodlust,” Will continued, pacing forward. Gideon lay to his right, eyes flitting between Will and Hannibal. The tray with the scalpel came within reach on Will’s left, glinting with temptation. Will considered what would be possible, what was the height of stupidity, and what could help him survive. “It’s your death you should be offering.”

“Killing me *would* satisfy you,” Hannibal agreed. “For a time.”

“Long enough.”

“Tell me, Will, how would you do it?” Hannibal’s eyes practically sparkled with joy at the idea, and fuck that confused the rush of adrenaline as it coursed through Will’s frame.

“Ideally?” He took another step forward, leaning in towards Hannibal’s face, so close he could feel the other man’s breath. “With my hands.”

“How... intimate.”

Will gripped the scalpel blindly, calculating the angle. It was a losing proposition, especially with his left hand, but he still had to try.

“Intimate,” Will rolled the word on his tongue, considering it, “seems appropriate.”

Even before he finished the words, he was whirling, slashing for Hannibal’s throat. Clearly expecting the move, Hannibal bent out of the path of the scalpel’s blade. He moved with easy speed and grace, but it was still a close call. Will could take pride in that. He failed to draw

blood, but only barely. Hannibal's dodge was exactly what he expected, and it let Will continue his move, bringing the scalpel around to his right and plunging it deep in Gideon's neck. He yanked back towards himself before Gideon could let out more than a gasp of shock, opening the flesh, cartilage, tendons and veins in and around the throat in a deeper and more brutal mirror of Abigail's death. Blood fountained from the deadly gouge, painting Will in the wrong killer's blood.

His plan was to pull the blade free, to at least attempt to use it against Hannibal once more. Instead he stood there, grip frozen, watching as Gideon's heart pumped in futility, flesh parted to reveal glimpses of the neck and throat's internal structure as a living being transformed at his hand, by his intention, into nothing but cooling flesh. Gideon's eyes closed without ceremony, having only held resignation. So close, personal, like kneeling over Abigail's dying form, but Will lacked any desire to save Abel Gideon. This wasn't firing his gun from a distance, a desperate reaction to save a life and stop a killer. Gideon hadn't been a threat, his death only a kind of mercy, though not one Will had desired to deliver.

And yet...

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, watching Gideon fade from person to corpse. His fate sealed by Will's choices and actions. His actions today, and his choices before. The uncovered memory that sealed this man's fate. He only knew that when Hannibal's hand folded over his, prying his fingers off the scalpel's handle, the trickle of blood had ceased. He didn't see where the scalpel went, but it hardly mattered.

"Where did you go?" Hannibal asked, holding Will's left hand delicately, moving to speak into his ear once more. When no answer was forthcoming, Hannibal's tone shifted to something deeper, more insistent, though pleased. "Did you imagine it was me?"

Will shook his head side to side, words not yet forming. Hannibal would never go so easily. The same Hannibal that held Will's hand with a delicate grip, as if it was something precious. He shifted behind Will, other arm winding around his waist, holding Will close to his chest. Distantly, Will knew he should react, pull away. He could see that he was in a sort of shock, but that wasn't the whole truth, either.

"Don't retreat," Hannibal urged. "You ended his suffering. He never had the strength to know himself. Not like you. Now you *really* know who you are."

"Do I?" Will wasn't sure he spoke aloud. Not until Hannibal replied.

"How did it feel?"

"Powerful." Will didn't hesitate. The word came out without permission from his brain. It was true, though. After spending so long feeling powerless, there was a joy in it he couldn't deny. He only hesitated after, as he felt Hannibal's strength wrapped around him in support and implicit praise. Will couldn't lie to himself anymore. He had craved this closeness, even as he'd been afraid of it, known it was wrong even when Hannibal had just been his psychiatrist, his friend. It was worse now, from the power imbalance to knowing Hannibal's truly sadistic nature, but god did it feel good.

He reached for his safety, his stability. He could see himself approaching the precipice, and she was the line back to his sanity. She was the strength he needed to save his mind, if not his life.

“It was beautiful to witness,” Hannibal finally voiced the praise aloud, and Will swallowed a sound that might otherwise destroy him. He clung to his lifeline, letting his voice fill with as much resolve as he could muster in that moment. “So-”

“I will never forgive you for Abigail,” Will cut him off out of desperation.

There was a silence that Will couldn’t read. No tensing or relaxing of the arm around his midriff, no change in the grip on his hand. Hannibal’s lips were practically touching Will’s ear, however, and Will was almost certain they curled into a smile.

“Come with me.” Hannibal stepped back, removing all contact except the light grip on Will’s left hand. He led Will back over the layers of plastic to the door they’d entered through. No blindfolds this time, or threats of drugs.

Will tugged his hand free, softly, but Hannibal released him without a struggle. His scrambled brain wasn’t sure why he bothered, but he needed it. Needed to clutch at his own guts. He stared down at his hand for a time, committing the pattern of faintly smeared blood to memory. A thin gap in the red left behind from the handle. When Hannibal spoke his name again, Will discovered he had followed out the door without conscious awareness. He looked at Hannibal, and then to the left.

Will Graham snapped, shattered, broke irrevocably. He stumbled towards the figure. He fell to his knees at the dead girl’s feet, looking up into brilliant, living eyes.

Abigail.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long wait for this one. The upshot is, my meds have been adjusted and I'm feeling much better. I may even get back to posting more than I have been able with this fic. The issue slowly crept up on me over many months, until it came to a head.

You can read more about this and future updates at my tumblr: jaded-quill

Thank you all for reading!

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Will puts the pieces back together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stared up at Abigail, eyes wide with shock. His mind stuttered, struggling to get a grip on reality. Blood in the Hobbs' kitchen. Too much blood to have lost and survive. He'd thrown up her *ear*. Price, Zeller, Katz, they'd tested it all. It was real. It was hers.

Abigail, a ghost made solid, shifted to glance at Hannibal. Will caught the flash of freshly healed flesh beneath thin hair. The blood... the blood didn't have to come out of her directly. Maybe she gave it up willingly. Hannibal would know how to fake arterial spray. A pump with enough pressure, applied precisely, could fool forensics. The conclusion that Abigail was dead seemed so obvious. All the evidence pointed to it. To Will as a murder. Hobbs so far in his head that Will had honoured every part of her.

Back in that kitchen, putting it all together, Will saw Hannibal had been pulling the strings all along. If his brain hadn't inflamed, fever and shock at his revelations overwhelming him, might he have seen the truth of Abigail's 'murder'? Will closed his eyes. Standing in Hobbs kitchen, he used Abigail to judge where the spray should originate. After, he removed her ear in one quick slice, the knife perfectly sharpened. It was almost painless at first. Surprise, and it would go smoothly. Maybe tell her the plan, but not when he would do it. It would be rude to take her ear without consent, or the chance of consent, even if it was under duress.

Blinking away the vision, Will focused up on Abigail once more. Alive! Not dead. Not even a prisoner. At least, not like Will is. Was? Was is naïve, and Will is not. This changed everything, or could. The present was a mess and the future still nebulous, shifting. Abigail was nervous, wary, touched by shame. She fidgeted in discomfort, yet still made an attempt at a smile.

"I'm sorry," she said and meant it. "I had to die, to be safe."

Will felt her fear. The FBI closing in, Jack on a mission to see her hang for her part in her father's crimes. Hannibal gave her a way out. Will could see the genius of it now. Appreciate it from their perspectives, if not his own. Not yet. Still too muddled, shocked.

"Abigail," Will breathed. Just because it made sense didn't mean it was real. He reached out, needing to be sure, and Abigail met his hand with her own. Small, warm, soft. *Real*. "I... I understand." Understood why she would do it. Still not entirely certain of Hannibal's

motivations. Oh, he'd put a lot together, but this changed things. He needed to process, get his feet back under him, literally and figuratively.

Will looked at where their hands met, saw the blood coating his skin once more, and pulled back with a surge of emotion he couldn't decipher. His own shame took the lead, but also so much more. Hannibal stepped up beside him and helped Will back to his feet. Will let him with no resistance. His brain felt both stalled out and like it was processing at top speed.

Abigail stood vibrantly alive before him. Still there. Solid. Real.

"I wanted to surprise you." Hannibal spoke once Will was standing again.

Will turned his head to look at his tormentor. He ripped his gaze from Abigail, drawn by the sheer audacity of the statement. There were a dozen scathing responses read to fly off his tongue. Then he met Hannibal's gaze, and all he could do was laugh. Disbelief morphed rapidly into desperation, panic. Was that.... hope? No, something in hope's orbit. The parts of Will's brain still functioning could only focus on Abigail's resurrection. Hannibal's motives were too much. A challenge on his best day.

There were dozens of questions he needed to ask Abigail. Most he couldn't ask with Hannibal standing right there. Forefront of Will's mind, beyond her continued safety, was why she let him think her voice was a hallucination. Will's reality had just suffered a seismic shift, but he hadn't forgotten his promise to her. He wouldn't tell.

"This doesn't change-" Will stumbled over his words, finally trailing off as he realized the lie.

Hannibal stood close. No longer touching, but near enough for static to jump from flesh to flesh. Will struggled not to react any more than he already had. It was easier, and the stronger move to focus on Abigail, and not the smug bastard who framed him for her murder. Will's imagination pulled together how beautifully it was done. It sunk into his consciousness with finality, but his appreciation did not heal his wounds or undo the betrayals.

"Are you ok?" He asked Abigail lamely. The only safe words he could think of. "Your.. your ear?" Will felt his stomach roil, but he ignored it.

"It's still healing a little, but Dr. Lecter is taking good care of me. It's been a bit lonely, but I'm safe here." Abigail flashed a smile that was more genuine than fake.

"It doesn't have to be lonely for much longer," Hannibal interjected. He placed a hand on Will's shoulder, looking like he used to with his mask firmly in place. "No one would think it strange if I turned this sabbatical into a permanent shift in my life. I left my career as a surgeon after another tragic death."

"Hannibal says he has a home outside Florence!" Abigail chimed in with genuine enthusiasm. The closest to childlike glee that Will had ever seen on her. "No one would know me there. I could go to school, maybe."

"A good education never goes to waste." Hannibal added approvingly.

Will could see the implications, both helpful and dangerous. Abigail had a healthy fear of Hannibal, but he'd slipped into a paternal role long before this moment. He would care for and dote on Abigail as long as she was useful. Until she either gained her independence or he finally killed her as surely as her biological father intended. As for Will...

Will took in a deep breath. He needed to think clearly, without the shock and overwhelm muddling him, and without the magnetic pull Hannibal constantly drew Will in with. He needed logic, clarity. Abigail, alive before him, still made for an illusory reality. He looked down at his own hands, reminding himself of the still wet blood clinging to his flesh. Abel Gideon's blood. Not a loss for humanity, and Will had saved the killer from the excruciating, slow torture that could still be in Will's future. Abigail being alive changed things, undeniably, but he wasn't sure how much, or what he should or could do about it.

Abel's blood gave him one idea. Hannibal wouldn't want the meat to spoil. Will sagged, just for a moment, catching himself just before Hannibal's hands gripped his waist to stop him falling. Perfect. Even better, before Will could even speak, Hannibal did.

"You've had quite the shock to your system, Will. You should clean up and get some rest." Once Will stood firmly on his own two feet, Hannibal let go of his waist and beckoned Abigail forward. "Please take Will up to his room and keep him company while I tidy up and fix us some lunch."

Hannibal's eagerness to do exactly what Will wanted, minus being locked up again, was unsettling. Fortunately, it was easy to make that feeling pass for queasiness. So Will nodded his agreement, letting Abigail take his hand and lead him back upstairs. At the bottom of the steps, he glanced back. Hannibal had vanished.

"Do we-" Will started, only to have Abigail cut him off with a shake of her head and a tug up the stairs. What choice did he have? She knew this place, how likely escape might be. Perhaps she didn't want to leave, and he had to consider that too. From what Will could see out the extensive windows on the ground floor, there was little but nature and an SUV he didn't recognize. Doubtless, the key's location known only to Hannibal.

The door to Will's cell/room was still open and Abigail stepped inside without hesitation. She looked around, as if seeing it for the first time. Peering the empty shelves, walls, and the shackle now half under the bed. Will sat down at the table. He didn't trust himself not to lie down and sleep if he sat on the bed, no matter how wired he currently felt. He hadn't entirely feigned his exhaustion.

"Can he hear us?" Will asked after several moments of silence.

"Only if he's currently watching. Nothing gets saved."

"No evidence."

Abigail shrugged a little.

"I don't think he's watching."

“Just enough rope to hang ourselves,” Will muttered softly.

“You planning on trying to escape?” Abigail took the seat Hannibal normally occupied. “I... I’d like you to stay, but you could easily overpower me and do whatever you want. It’ll be hard to get a car to stop when you’re covered in blood.”

She had a point.

“You want me to stay.”

“I...” Abigail considered her words. “I don’t have a life to go back to.”

“Looks like I don’t either, but those are both his fault. He framed me for more than just your murder, and if he hadn’t called your father, your Mom might still be alive.”

“Maybe. Or maybe that was always how it was gonna end for us.” It might be true, but the sentiment reeked of Hannibal. “I won’t stop you, if you need to try.” Abigail made clear. “He will. When he does, I hope he forgives you. I d- don’t know if he’ll want me without you with us.”

“Quite the emotional blackmail,” Will observed sadly. Then, because it might also be true, and Will’s sanity had long flown out the window. “I’m sure he’s prouder of you than you think.”

“Maybe you won’t believe me, but I’m not trying to manipulate you. I just... I don’t think I matter to him if you’re not here,” Abigail countered. “I hope I’m wrong. He’s... very hard to read.”

“I’m getting better at it,” Will muttered without thinking. He couldn’t blame her, especially since he knew she could probably stop him if she really wanted. It might all be an act to keep the hunting knife tucked under her jacket from needing to be revealed, but she’d already gutted one man for threatening her.

“You seem... kinda calm, for everything you’ve just been through.” Abigail offered after the silence stretched on.

“Clarity strikes when you least expect.” Will brushed back his hair only to feel the drying blood caked in there. He let out a small sound of disgust at the filth. His face itched. He tried not to think how it was the mess, less than it being the remains of Abel, that currently bothered him. “I need a shower. Uh... make yourself at home?”

Maybe some time under the hot spray would help him make some crucial decisions.

It wasn't until Will stood under the pounding, scalding spray that his thoughts settled. The too-hot and slightly too harsh water, by design, grounded him in his body. Will let it dig at his skin, scouring the blood. Blood that had poured hot over his flesh. A pale second to the veins he truly wanted to open. And yet... When Hannibal had to pull back to avoid the scalpel's blade? Getting that close to slicing into him after everything that had happened? Even though he'd expected the move to fail (Hannibal hadn't left that scalpel there accidentally), having it snatched from his fingers by a hair...

Hannibal had been so pleased, proud of how Will hadn't hesitated as he carved through Abel Gideon's neck. He'd planned to cut deep, the only way to ensure a kill with his clumsy left hand. Still, remembering it now, Will had carved through nearly half the man's neck. Excessive. Brutal. Transference to a degree, but he hadn't hesitated. The rush hadn't been something Will plucked from another killer's head. No, that unexpected flood of power was all his own. Too similar to Hobbs, while also entirely different.

Will was used to seeing himself as a killer. He could dive so deep into a killer's head that he lost himself a little, but he'd always had two touchstones. First, Will had never killed before he met Jack Crawford and Hannibal Lecter, no matter how often he imagined it. Second, he knew who he was. The bedrock of his soul, no matter how much he empathized, he still knew himself. Then, suddenly, Will Graham *was* a killer, even if it saved Abigail's life. He had killed, and Hannibal did his considerable best to make certain that Will's grip on who he was became slippery and full of doubt.

Will scrubbed at his hair for a third time, determined to remove every drop of blood, every trace of Abel Gideon. Whoever Will was now, Hannibal was obsessed with him. There was no other word to describe it. Curiosity didn't lead someone who loved the reputation and adulation he'd nurtured to suddenly decide to uproot that life, start over in obscurity at the least. Even if Hannibal left without suspicion, Will was still a wanted man. Hannibal was not inherently impulsive, but he'd made several impulsive decisions regarding Will. Two that he knew for certain, but he suspected more.

Will... It would be fair to say he'd been obsessed with Hannibal Lecter for even longer, if his studies of the Ripper counted in such things. He thought they did.

Abigail was alive. The relief was immense, but she wasn't free. She might genuinely want them all to run off to Italy, but she had no other options. She might be alive, but her life was contingent on Will's decisions. It was, Will knew. Such emotional blackmail, whether Abigail wanted to accept it or not, and Hannibal held all the cards.

It didn't matter how drawn Will felt. It didn't matter how fear and anger so easily transmuted into much more enticing dangers. It didn't matter the charm, the brilliance, the attraction he felt he must admit to himself, a form without proper definition, but there nonetheless. Even if Will tossed being framed, the way Hannibal had isolated him, and used Will's boiling brain to fuck with his head?

Will needed answers, still, but what he needed more was to a way to exploit Hannibal's obsession. He needed to change the narrative.

After his shower, Will talked with Abigail at length. The clever girl had checked on Hannibal while Will cleaned up, and she was sure he was too busy dealing with Gideon's corpse to be watching or listening to them. Evidently, he was confident that Will wouldn't try to escape just yet, or that he couldn't. Ultimately, Will wasn't ready to abandon Abigail so soon after getting her back, and Hannibal knew it.

"Why did you lie to me?" Will finally asked.

Abigail averted her eyes, turning her head slightly. The movement caused her hair to swing just enough for a flash of her mutilated ear to be revealed once more.

"Same reason I do most things," she explained with only slight hesitation. "Survival."

Will gave her a moment to gather her thoughts, as she was clearly struggling.

"He said you couldn't know I was alive until the right moment. The first time I panicked, but... When I knew you were starving, I couldn't help, but- well- I didn't lie exactly. I just let you assume."

"You were worried what he'd do."

"I think locking me in my room was the least he'd do if I ruined his plans for you. You're important to him. I don't understand why he brought you here like this, but that much is obvious."

Will put that last bit aside for a moment, then put the rest of the pieces together, carefully but easily enough.

"You talked to me when he was back in Baltimore. You knew enough of his schedule to be sure he wouldn't know." It made sense. Time to dig a little deeper. "Yesterday, you wanted me to give in."

"Selfish," she shared a smile that was more pain than happiness. "I might not read him very well, but something changed. When he left last time, I dunno, it felt like there was something big about to happen. I thought if you just did what he wanted, maybe we all got to live."

There was a long silence. Will had long since set himself up in the doorway. If the thing tried to slam shut, he wasn't getting stuck inside. Abigail, however, seemed content to sit at the table.

"You killed that man," Abigail cautiously broke the silence.

Will took pity on her, in a way.

"I did," he confirmed. "Now he'll want me to eat my kill." Want, not need? Maybe. Maybe not. Refusing would be dangerous, either way.

“Will you?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

He really hadn’t. The meal would be delicious, and now Will knew he had eaten people before. Knowingly engaging in cannibalism? Of a man he killed? Blood only freshly scrubbed off his skin? That was much different. Even if it was, strategically, his only choice.

“I ate people for years. If you don’t know, you can’t tell.” She spoke softly, still ashamed to admit it.

“Here?”

Abigail shook her head in answer.

“Hannibal’s an excellent chef. He’s been feeding me his victims since Cassie Boyle.” Will flashed her a tight, almost vicious smile. “This *will* be different. Even under duress, making the choice will change you.” Will? Maybe he’d already changed. Maybe the opened doors would be worth it.

Lunch, to Will’s surprise, contained not a single piece of meat. The meal, which the three of them ate at a modest dining table, comprised almost entirely of fruits and vegetables cut into simple shapes (for Hannibal). Also served were several freshly baked pastries. They were, naturally, delicious.

As he’d been prepared to have to face a far more daunting meal, Will readily dug in. If he was eating and enjoying the food, he’d have a reprieve from more verbal fencing. Besides which, it really was delicious. The croissant he bit into first was so warm, buttery and flakey that he had to hold back a moan of delight. Given the look Hannibal gave him, Will hadn’t been entirely successful. Well, at least the slip served his tentative plan.

Abigail and Hannibal exchanged some pleasantries, including a temporary switch to Italian. Abigail struggled, hesitating in places, but as far as Will could tell, she was making progress through the basics. Hannibal seemed satisfied, at any rate. They both attempted to engage Will in what was essentially small talk, though Hannibal’s never stayed small. Will hated small talk and largely replied with terse, clipped language. He didn’t expect Abigail to push it, but was surprised when Hannibal let even some intentionally rude responses slide with no response. One was just a snort of derision, and the man hardly twitched.

Anyone else, maybe even Abigail, would assume that Hannibal was giving him some space, or leeway, given the events of the morning. Will knew better. If Hannibal wasn’t poking and prodding over lunch, it was because he had bigger plans for the rest of the day. There was a reason there wasn’t a scrap of meat on their plates. Will couldn’t guess exactly what the plan

was, but he knew he wouldn't like it. It definitely involved some combination of Gideon and dinner.

When they had all finished, Hannibal suggested Abigail resume her studies. She hesitated only briefly, eyes catching Will's. He gave her a slight nod, reassurance if not permission, and she thanked Hannibal for lunch before vanishing toward what must be her room.

Better for her to not be in the middle of whatever was about to happen.

As soon as she was out of sight, he turned to Hannibal with his usual disdainful defensive posture. The best defence being a good offence was often true enough, and Will's loathing of socialization made this near his default.

"Do you think you can use her to control me?" Will always preferred to go straight for the throat, conversationally speaking. In terms of actual violence, too, it turned out.

"What makes you think I wish to control you?" Hannibal asked with what should be mockery, yet sounded utterly sincere.

Will could have listed a number things. The kidnapping and captivity were right at the top of the list, but they weren't alone. Instead, he let his face express how unimpressed he was with the question.

There was the slightest twitch of Hannibal's lip, but not enough to get a read on. He met Will's gaze, and as uncomfortable as eye contact made him, Will knew he couldn't look away.

"We once spoke of being as fathers to Abigail," he replied in that soothing, hypnotic way of his. "I never stopped seeing a future where that was true."

"Right," Will scoffed. "After I become what you want me to be?"

"I can only whisper through the chrysalis," Hannibal explained with something sparkling in the depth of his eyes. "What emerges is beyond me. I only knew it would be something spectacular." He stood in a single graceful motion and began gathering the remains of their meal. "Assist me with the dishes?"

Will frowned, parsing the tenses in confusion. Hannibal didn't wait, carrying the plates off to the kitchen. Will supposed he might as well continue to play along. Scooping up the few dishes he could with only one hand, Will followed.

"You used the past tense," Will accused. More in confusion than anger.

Hannibal carefully sorted out the leftovers, the remnants to be disposed of, and piled the dishes by the sink. The kitchen here paled compared to the one in his Baltimore home, but still exceptionally well equipped. He took his time before replying. Will couldn't tell if he was considering his words or simply focusing on the task at hand. Finally, he stepped closer, encroaching on Will's personal space.

"This morning you were afraid," he offered, finally.

Will, feeling uncomfortable and several other emotions, was about to take a step back. With those words, however, he stilled in place, focusing on the face so close to his own, the eyes that were back to intriguing instead of making him uncomfortable. This morning, Will *had* been quietly terrified. He'd known the odds were that he was about to suffer immensely at this man's hands. More than ever before. He'd kept his shit together, collected information, resolved to take what chance he could get, but he'd still been afraid. Now? He didn't quite understand it, but fear was no longer the word he would use. Was it just the knowledge that Hannibal's plans were bigger, and Abigail proof of that? No, because he still didn't trust a word of it. Hannibal was never so simple in his designs. Still, Will wasn't afraid. He felt several things in that moment, but even knowing Hannibal could easily harm him and would, if he thought it necessary, Will simply accepted the possibility. It was a bit like dealing with a stray dog that showed fear through aggression. If you knew the signs, the right way to approach and interact, they wouldn't hurt you. If they did, well, even dogs weren't entirely predictable.

"What's stopping me from leaving right now, then? Other than Abigail."

"Your lack of shoes, fresh snow, and the remote location aside?" Hannibal quipped far too lightly.

"Sure," Will drawled. "You can strike being a wanted man off that list too."

That was definitely a hint of a chuckle.

"If you flew from here, I would let you go." Hannibal's words set Will even further off balance. His first instinct was that Lecter was lying, but an outright lie would be too simple.

"I should like to show you Florence, Will. So that you might truly know me, as only I can ever truly know you. Cherish your darkness, rather than attempt to stamp out your fire." Hannibal slowly circled around him, speaking easily but with a purposeful undertone of remorse. "On the run or in a cell, it matters little. You face lonely future without purpose. No brain fever required for that madness." He stood before Will again, leaning in as he continued. "Never able to see me brought to justice, or to take justice into your own hands. To wrap your hands around my neck and *squeeze*."

There was barely any distance between their flesh, breath, their lips. Will's head swam, limbs tingled. His plans vanished from his mind. He still wasn't afraid, but he sure as fuck wasn't comfortable. Frozen between stepping back and the damning temptation to lean in. He held his breath, and Hannibal slid to Will's right, moving past to retrieve more dirty dishes. He got halfway there before he turned back, an open, sly smile curling the lips that had just been so temptingly close. Casual, calm, collected.

"Wash or dry?"

Chapter End Notes

Sick cats that need a bunch of meds do slow things down. She's doing mostly much better, though, yay!

Thank you to everyone reading and commenting!

We're in the endgame now! 3 more chapters minimum, but maybe only 3 more more.

(I love the concept of Kintsugi Will as much as the Chrysalis metaphor, but it didn't fit the dialog. Maybe a future chapter?)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!